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In the Grip of the Barren Lands

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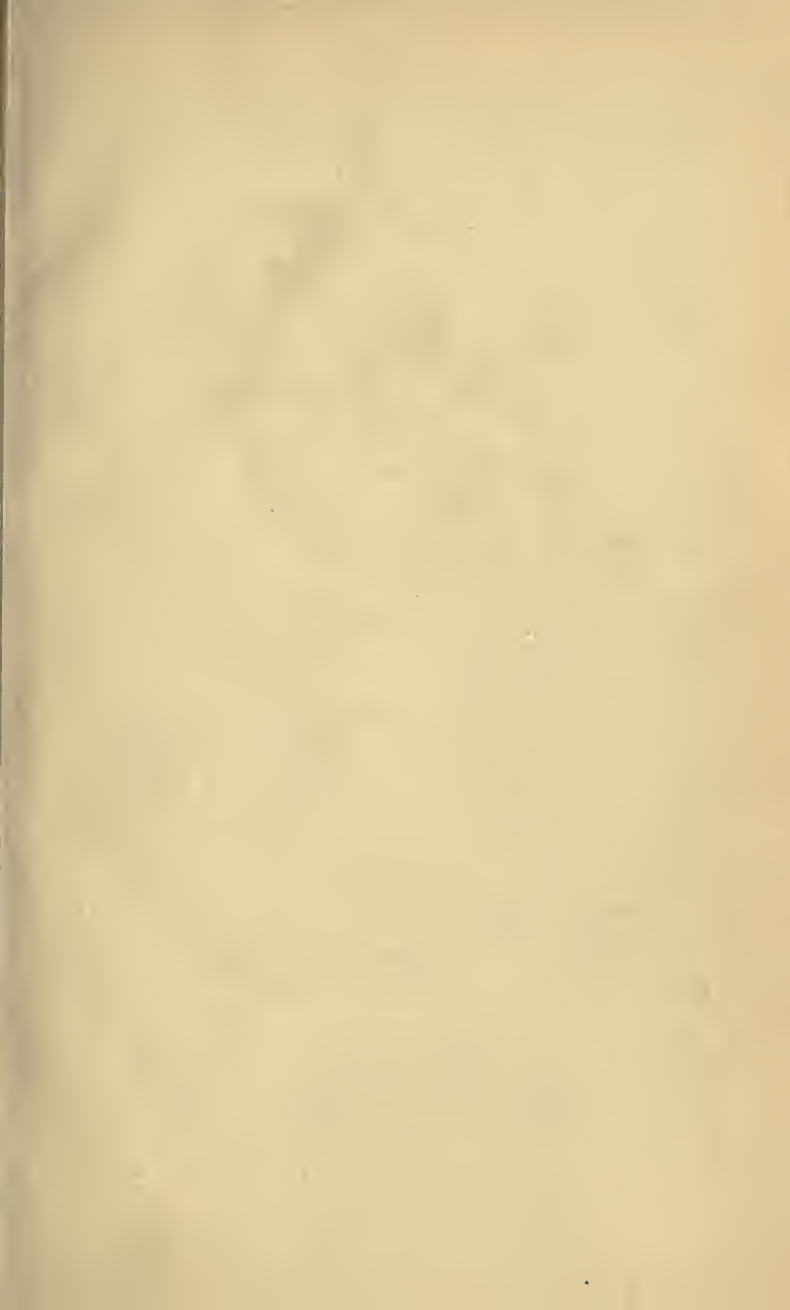
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SCARFACE AT BAY

Page 195

Frontispiece

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In the Grip of the Barren Lands

BY
NORMAN BLAKE

Illustrated by John de Walton

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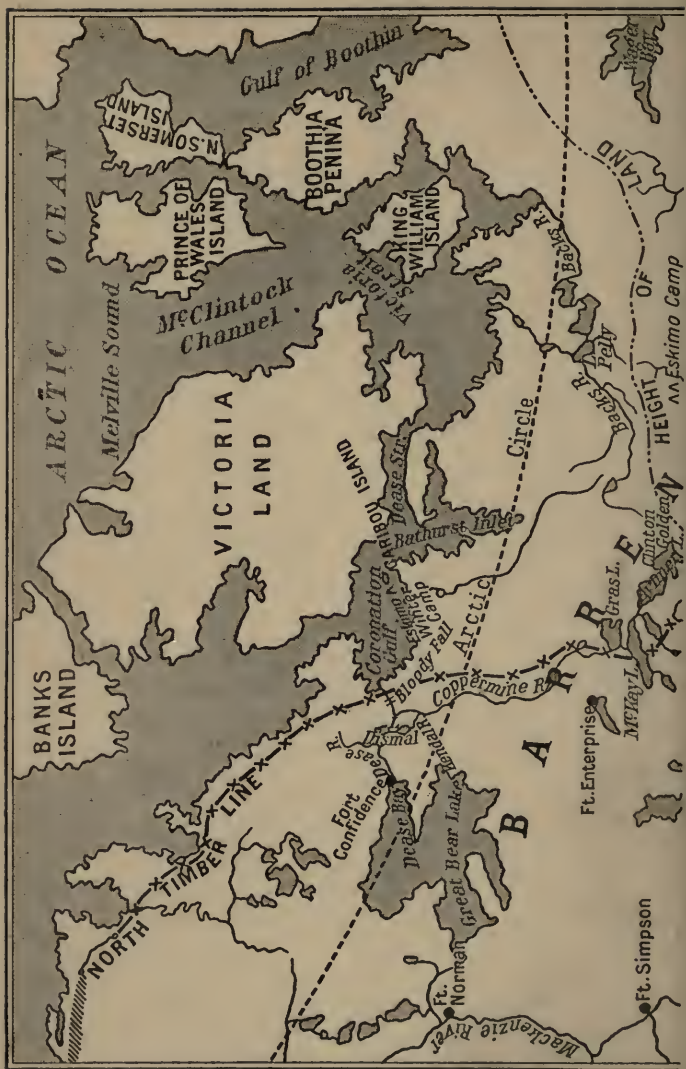
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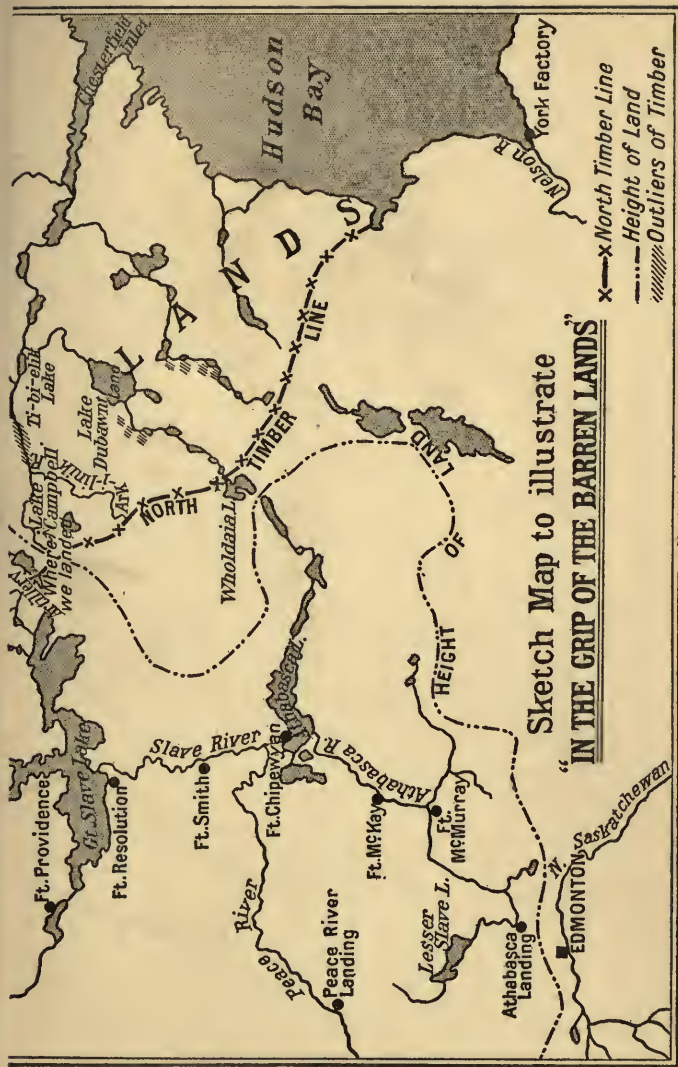
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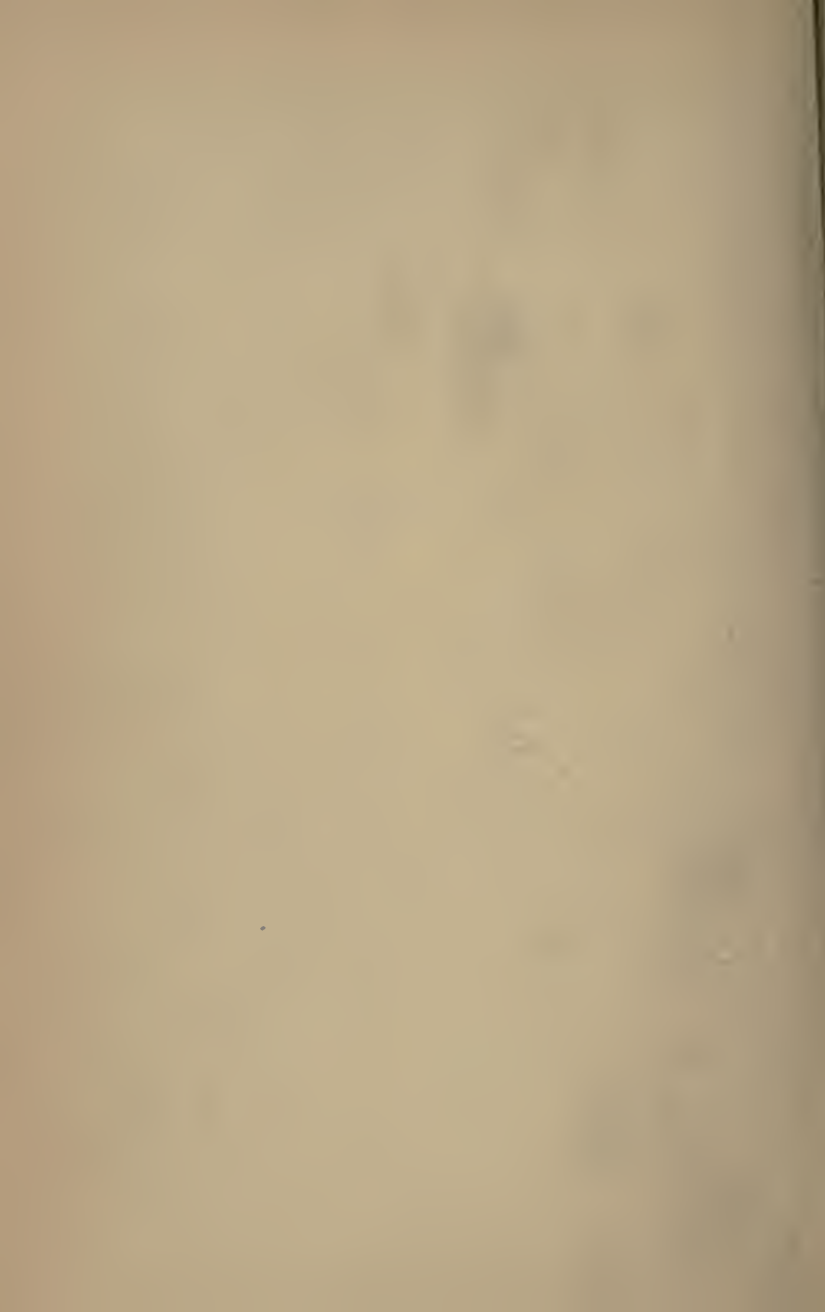
Planter Dick. A. O. Cooke.

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IN THE GRIP OF THE BARREN LANDS

CHAPTER I

In which a Rope Slips

The whole business began in Edmonton on 20th May three years ago, but it seems at least ten years, so much has happened since. I have good reason to remember the day, and so have Alec and Bill. It was one of those spring days when, at last, after the long hard winter the air has lost its bite. Everything was once more fresh and green. I had a job for the summer, and not a worry in the world.

The balloon was barely moving, just gently swaying now and then in the light breeze from the north. It seemed almost as sleepy as I was.

I must have dozed off as I sat on the bench in front of the shack. The midday meal was just over.

"You shouldn't work so hard," said a voice. "Strain is bad for growing boys."

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"I thought Scouts were taught to be polite to their elders," I said, opening my eyes.

But Alec was not a bit impressed. He merely slipped off his pack and sat down. He was sixteen, and had recently become a Rover Scout. Another boy was with him—also in shorts.

"This is my cousin from England," said Alec. "He's going to have a look at Canada this summer. He's a Chickadee."

Alec himself belonged to a Crow Patrol.

"Where are you hiking to?" I asked.

"Oh, out to White Mud Creek for the week-end. We came in on the way to see how you were getting on. We were told you had a job here. What's the idea?"

"I'm looking after the stuff. The boss—Cochrane is his name—is experimenting with helium gas. I'd explain, but you wouldn't understand. I live in the shack to see that Scouts and other suspicious characters——"

Alec's staff in my stomach cut short the sentence.

"Why did he come all the way out to Alberta to work and then hide his shack out here in the woods?" asked Alec.

"The reason is simple enough: Alberta is one of the few places in America where helium is found, and this old gas-well has lots of it."

"Just one more question. What's the balloon got to do with it?"

"Easy again. The Professor once wrote a paper on air currents, and some other fellow has just said

that he is all wrong, and he sent down east for this balloon and is going to prove that he is right. We will be starting any time now on our trip. I was just going to finish loading the basket when you came along."

"We? Why the we?"

"I'm going along as chore-boy and cook."

"Poor Cochrane!" said Alec.

"If you want to camp at the creek to-night," I said severely, "you'd better be getting along."

They slipped their packs on.

"Well, good-bye, Jim," said Alec. "Don't be touchy. I dare say you can cook canned beans well enough. Aren't you going to let us see your stuff before we go?"

They climbed into the basket and looked round.

"Lots of junk," said Bill.

"Say, Jim, which way is he going?"

"South or east. There's the boss now up on that platform. He's got wind gauges and barometers and all kind of funny instruments up there, and he gets heaps of telegrams from all over the country telling how the winds are blowing. Then he makes odd-looking charts."

"Well," said Alec, "I'd be keener to go north than south or east. Wouldn't it be great to sail away up north where the moose and caribou and buffalo are?"

"I would just as soon go west to the Rockies," said Bill. "There's plenty of wild goats and big-horn sheep and grizzlies."

"When you fellows have stopped talking about the

places this balloon isn't going to, how about moving on?" I suggested.

The wind was increasing somewhat by this time, and I hurried into the shack for more of the supplies.

Just as I reached the door on my way back with a bundle of stuff, I heard a cry of alarm from the boys. I saw that one of the guy-ropes that held the balloon down had been loosened by the rising wind. The basket was rocking.

"Climb out," I shouted, as I dropped my bundles and ran forward. A sudden squall had struck us; dust eddied around the shack, and the balloon swayed and tugged at its moorings.

Then it lurched, and the boys went sprawling down into the bottom of the basket.

I grabbed the guy-rope with one hand, and as I did so I was swung round. I managed to get my other hand on the rope. Before I could steady myself I felt the ground slip away from under me, and I knew that I was in the air. I glanced up. Two white faces were looking at me over the edge of the basket. I glanced down. Cochrane was rushing from the shack waving his arms excitedly. "Pull," he shouted, and I heard the word "rope". What he meant I did not know. All I knew was that my whole weight was pulling at a rope, that the shack looked terribly far away, and that I was sick with fear.

As I hung dangling between heaven and earth, an overpowering impulse came over me to let go. But I hung on. My hands were burning from the rope slipping through them as I was whisked off the earth.

"Hang on," shouted Alec, "we'll drop you a bowline."

It seemed an eternity before I at last saw the rope appear over the edge of the basket and come slowly down to me.

"Get your feet through the loop and we'll try to work it up to your armpits."

With great difficulty I managed to get my legs through. It was more trouble to wriggle my body in, for my clothes kept catching the rope. Finally it slipped into place, and I sagged into the supporting bowline exhausted. I felt secure now, but I durst not look down. By grasping the guy-ropes I helped the boys, as, by slow jerks, they pulled me up. After what seemed an hour I touched the basket, got a grip on its edge, and tumbled in.

For a moment nobody said anything. Alec and Bill did not seem very much worried now that I was safe.

"You must be horribly out of condition," said Alec, with a grin, "I thought we'd never get you on board."

Bill asked if the balloon was a self-starter. Scouts, I knew, were supposed to be cool in any emergency, but really this seemed rather overdoing it.

"Where are we going to land?" went on Alec. Then I understood their coolness. They thought I knew something about controlling balloons.

"I wish I could say."

"Do you mean you can't bring the thing down?"

"That's it. I'm awfully sorry about it."

"Can't we do anything? Have we just got to go

on drifting till something happens?" There was a break in Alec's voice.

"I'm afraid so."

Nothing more was said for a while. We looked below. We had drifted a little south, but mostly straight up. The river looked like a long gleaming ribbon. The great bridge was no bigger than a boy's meccano model. A speck of a street-car was crawling across. We were all staring at this strange flat world spread below us when Bill shouted out:

"We're going the other way now."

It was true. Streets and houses were passing southward beneath us. A moment or two later we were recrossing the river. We had got into a higher air current, and were headed north. Now we were passing over the business part of the city.

Alec fished a pair of field-glasses out of his pack.

"They are staring up at us," he said. "Gee, I can see our own house and the things on the clothes-line. Quick, give me a piece of paper and a pencil. There's a chance somebody may pick it up."

I found a scrap of paper in my pocket. He scribbled hard for a moment.

"Will this do?" he asked. "'Do not worry about us. We'll land safely somehow and get home.'"

He folded it up, wrote his father's name and address, and was just going to drop it when Bill stopped him.

"It will be safer this way," he said. He tied it to the end of a piece of string. He shoved his hand into his pack and dragged out a cake of soap.

"I guess we can spare this," and he fastened it to

the string. A moment later it was tearing earthwards. Alec was busy with the glasses.

"It's hit a roof," he shouted. "It's slipped off and just missed a man on the sidewalk. He's picked it up. Now he's looking up. Well, they'll know we're still alive."

The letter had been dropped none too soon. A few minutes later we were clear of the city. Fields and woods were on every side below. The wind had freshened, and we were heading for the North Pole at a rate that any explorer might have envied. But we were not explorers—we were only three boys, and I, the eldest, was barely twenty. Nobody could help us; we could not even help ourselves—and suddenly a terrible feeling of loneliness came upon us. We were cut off from everything and everybody.

All at once our ears throbbed with a loud droning sound. We looked to the south. An aeroplane was headed straight for us.

"It's old Terry," cried Alec, in excitement. Terry Bowers had flown in France and lost a leg. Since his return he had been making some money by giving thrills to ordinary people—ten dollars for ten minutes.

We all seemed to think our troubles were over. I fancy we had no clear idea of how Terry would help us, but somehow rescue seemed at hand. By now he was very close. He sheered off a moment later to the east. We could see his passenger clearly—a fat rosy gentleman.

"Terry," I shouted, "we are adrift."

Terry cheerfully waved his hand.

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"He can't hear because of the motor," said Bill, with his mouth to my ear.

Terry was now heading back to the city. I tried once more.

"How do you bring a balloon down?" I yelled.

Another wave and a grin from Terry. Evidently he thought we were merely taking an outing.

In a few seconds Terry was a speck in the distance. A moment more and he was lost to sight. With him seemed to go our hopes.

"Surely there is something we can do," said Bill.

"Cochrane didn't intend to go just anywhere the wind chose to take him, did he?" asked Alec. "What would he have done to control the balloon?"

I had to confess I hadn't the faintest idea. And I thought bitterly of the hours I had loafed away at the shack when I might have learned a few things about balloons. Alec and Bill said nothing. They probably knew what I was thinking.

The wind was freshening. Our speed was increasing, and we were still climbing. Before us lay the great north country with its forests, its vast lakes and rivers, and its mere handful of human beings. Behind us and below us lay everything that was comfortable, safe, and familiar.

CHAPTER II

In which our Journey is nearly brought to an End

I fancy that all three of us felt that we must not sit and brood on our situation. It was a relief when Alec said:

“ Well, let’s have a look at our luggage.”

We began to take stock of our equipment and felt happier in having something to do. There was a good deal of stuff of one sort and another. Cochrane had provided for most of the chances which might occur. To begin with, we noted a shot-gun and rifle. There was plenty of ammunition for both. These interested Alec, who was rather a good shot.

“ You’ll probably get lots of practice before we see home again,” I said to him.

“ Alec can have the guns,” said Bill. “ Me for this,” picking up some fishing tackle. “ You can be cook, and we’ll do our best to keep you busy.”

Of the remaining things those we thought would be most useful were a bundle of sweaters and blankets, ropes of different lengths and sizes, one tin of canned heat, and a compass. There were some scientific instruments which we did not understand, a radio

set and a gramophone in a case with half a dozen records.

"That, anyway, will be of no use," said Bill, shoving it into a corner.

There remained Alec's and Bill's rucksacks. We emptied them out. The boys had been going out only for a week-end, and, of course, had not many things. A frying-pan, two billies, two towels, a cake of soap (the other cake had gone with the note), two small boxes of matches, a candle, two sweaters, two flash-lights, and some food comprised their equipment. Of course they both had knives, axes, and staves.

We had been so interested in looking over our miscellaneous belongings that none of us had remembered the thing that mattered most. The sight of food brought us up with a jerk.

"Is that all we have to eat?" asked Alec in a quiet voice.

We hunted through everything again. No. There was only what Alec and Bill had brought. I had been on the point of putting Cochrane's food supplies into the basket when the boys had come along. They were lying in the shack, and I remembered with regret the big sides of bacon, the bag of rolled oats, the packages of tea, the dried fruit, and a dozen other things.

"How many meals will this give us?" asked Alec.

We set to calculating. There were two large cans of pork and beans, two pounds of sausages, a pound of sliced bacon, a little bag of tea, four loaves of bread,

half a dozen oranges, and a few lumps of sugar. That was all. Plenty for two boys for two days, but slim enough for three for nobody knew how long.

"If we go very easy, there's enough food for about fifteen meals, I should think," said Bill. "Gosh, why didn't we take those hard-boiled eggs your mother wanted to give us, Alec?"

"I'll never travel light again," groaned Alec.

What was to happen when the fifteen meals were over we tried not to imagine. I had no means of guessing how far we might go before landing. That, of course, depended chiefly on the strength and persistence of the wind. All I knew about the behaviour of the balloon was that, as the air cooled, it would sink; how far, I did not know. As to how high it might climb I was equally ignorant, but I had an uncomfortable feeling of having read somewhere of people freezing to death in balloons at great altitudes. If that happened it would not matter how far it sank afterwards.

We were still going due north—at what height and at what speed we could only guess. There was no sense of motion. We appeared to be standing still, and the earth seemed to be moving rapidly from north to south. We felt no wind. There was not a rattle from our cordage. Not a sound of any sort. If only we had had plenty of food and a knowledge of how to control the balloon, nothing could have been jollier. But those were two big IF's.

Below us was spread a pleasant wooded country, dotted with small lakes, and with winding rivers here

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and there. From time to time we saw settlements and cleared fields.

"I wish we could choose our landing-place," said Alec. "How would you like to come down near a farmhouse and have a good feed of bacon and eggs?"

After that, of course, we could think of nothing but food. It was now after five o'clock. We all looked longingly at the bacon and sausages and hastily away again—as if we had just got up from a large Christmas dinner. But in a short while the bluff was too painful to keep up.

"Well," said Alec, "I'm all for having a bite now. If we're going to starve, at least we needn't begin yet."

Nobody had any objection to eating, and three slices of bacon were soon sizzling in the frying-pan over the tin of canned heat. But one rasher of bacon and one slice of bread did not take long to eat. In a few minutes the meal was over.

But, if the bacon was not enough to satisfy our hunger, it was enough to make us realize that there was something worse than hunger—thirst. Our mouths were intolerably salty, and we had not a drop of water. The package of tea seemed a mockery. We could think of nothing but cool drinks. And there, as we looked down, was a large river directly below us. The sight parched our throats. We were maddened by thinking of its cold freshness.

As we could not drink and dared not eat, we decided to make arrangements for sleeping. For all we knew, there might be a night's work ahead of us. But there was not room for three to lie down, and anyway it

seemed wise to keep some sort of watch on our movements. If we should land in the dark it would be of great help if we had even a vague idea of where the nearest settlement or Hudson's Bay post might be. It was arranged that I should take the first watch.

Soon after Alec and Bill were curled up I caught sight of a large lake to the north. From what I remembered of the map I supposed it was Lake Athabaska. If that were so, then the river which emptied into it was the Athabaska River.

If my guess were correct we must have been travelling fairly fast. The sky seemed bluer than I had ever seen it. A few clouds low down in the west were taking on the colours which only a northern sunset can show.

Soon there was only glimmering twilight. And suddenly something happened to the balloon. It wilted and dropped until we were perhaps four hundred feet from the earth. And still we went down, down. The lower we sank the more slowly we moved. Presently we drifted over a small lake. We were, so far as I could judge in the fading light, not more than fifty feet up. The air was all at once full of the cry of startled waterfowl, the sound of splashing as they rose, and the whirr of their wings. I thought for a moment we were going to light in that icy grey water, but we just scraped over the tree-tops at the north end. The air was warmer over the land, and we rose a bit. But if this small lake had nearly brought us down, what would the great stretch of Lake Athabaska do should we drift over it? We were now headed straight for it.

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"Let's chuck some of the stuff overboard," suggested Bill.

But, after all, there was nothing heavy, and it seemed hardly worth while to throw away a few trifles which might come in useful. We decided to trust to luck. It was the only thing to do.

On, ever on, into the darkness we floated. As the night wore away we were drifting low.

Then began endless minutes of nervous waiting. An owl hooted close below us. A night-hawk passed in the darkness with its "peent, peent". The air was chilly. Even with extra sweaters we were shivering. We peered down but could not make out whether we were over Lake Athabaska or not.

Then very distinctly we heard an unmistakable sound—the lap of waves. We all looked down, straining our eyes. Were we sinking or not? The wash of the water sounded closer.

"Hang on to the basket whatever happens," I said. Bill tried his flashlight, but it showed nothing. Everything was deadly still except for the ceaseless lapping of the waves. Then all at once there was a bump and scrape. At the same moment Bill shouted:

"Ice!"

The flashlight revealed a smooth stretch of ice on all sides. How far it went we could not tell. Were we on a small bit in the middle of the lake? Could we make our way to land? Should we drift off in the dark?

I fastened a rope round my waist. Doing something was easier than sitting still. I handed the end to Alec and took Bill's flashlight.

"Hold on tight," I said, "and haul in when I shout. I'm going to reconnoitre."

I lowered myself gingerly over the edge. The ice was firm. Cautiously I went forward, Alec paying out the rope. It was a queer business. Only twelve hours ago I had been doing odd jobs at the shack, and here I was tethered to a balloon in the middle of a great lake on a chunk of ice.

If it had not been for the flashlight I should have been in. I had come to the edge. The water was heaving and gurgling. It looked inky black. Slowly I moved to my right, and called out to Alec to let him know what I was doing. In a moment or two I had almost circled the basket. On one side, however, the ice stretched farther than the rope would allow me to go. I made my way back and reported to Alec and Bill. They tied on another length of rope, and again I tried to find out how far the ice went, but again failed. We agreed that further exploring was too risky. The only safe thing was to stay near the balloon. We could do nothing but wait for daylight.

"At any rate," said Bill, "we can have a drink."

In the excitement we had forgotten our thirst. It did not take long to fill the billy-cans—nor to empty them. Then we refilled them and put one on the canned heat for tea. We were shivering with the cold. The tea was weak, for we thought it well to be thrifty, but it was very hot. The billy-can was soon empty. I at once refilled it. We did not know when we might start once more on our wanderings."

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"Well," said Bill, "if there is water to drink, why not water to fish in?"

He began to rummage for the tackle.

"Can you spare a scrap of bacon, Cook?"

He baited his hook and put a leg out of the basket. When there was fishing round, Bill forgot everything else.

"No, my son," I said, "not without a rope. Suppose a wind comes along, or suppose you hook a fellow big enough to pull you in?"

We roped him and sent him out with our blessing. A fish of fair size would give us at least one meal. We watched the flashlight move off and then stop. Bill had reached the water.

He laid the flash on the ice, knelt down to prepare his tackle, then stood up and cast. Nothing happened for several minutes, then there was an excited exclamation, and Bill came running towards the basket.

"It's a big fellow," he shouted.

He reached us, handed me the flash, and started to pull in the line. A fish came flapping and slithering along. Bill swung it up and into the basket.

"I thought it better to take no chances of losing him at the edge," he explained. "Let me see him. I'll have another in a jiffy. Oh, hang it, the line's all messed up."

Indeed it was. The pike, in flopping about, had made the line into a slimy tangle. Bill sat down to straighten it out, but with only a flashlight to see by it was slow work.

At last it was done; but it was just too late. As we

raised our heads we noticed a faint light in the east. With the dawn would probably come the wind; and, wind or not, we should rise with the sun.

"If the wind's from the north we'll be home by night," said Alec.

We were all in the basket waiting. The mist made a heavy curtain about us. All at once it began to roll away—but not towards the south. We were out of luck, and were not to see home yet for a while. In a few minutes the sun was up. We rose, and, as we did so, the breeze freshened.

And then between the shreds of vapour we saw the chance we had missed. We had lain for hours within two hundred yards of the land. We could have walked ashore. A quarter of a mile to the south was a log cabin with a thin wisp of smoke curling up from its rude chimney. We had played safe in not leaving the basket, and our caution had only shoved us into unknown dangers.

Bill was the first to speak.

"We might have been sitting down to breakfast in that cabin if we hadn't got up in such a hurry."

"It's Sunday morning," added Alec. "What about some toast, coffee, finnan haddie, and marmalade? That's what they'll be having at home."

Since the beginning of our mad trip we had had only one light meal and a cup of tea. And now, after a cold night, we were ravenous. The vote was for sausages. It was not easy to be content with one apiece.

"Fish for dinner at any rate," said Bill, pulling out his knife. The pike was soon cleaned—at least it was

as clean as he could make it without water, for we had no intention of wasting that on a pike. For the moment there was nothing more to be done, and we tried to think of something besides the next meal.

The sun was comfortably warm, and we were steadily rising. The lake was to the west of us now. Above us were great billowy clouds. Soon they were all around us.

“Look at our shadow,” shouted Alec.

There on a cloudbank was a huge spectral balloon encircled by a rainbow.

A few moments later we were looking down on a snowy sunlit plain. We were above the clouds. Through the rifts here and there we could see the earth far, far below.

“Castles in the air,” cried Alec. “Look at that one with the tower.”

The air was now getting decidedly chilly. Then in a moment we were wrapped round by fog. We could see nothing. A clammy chill pierced our clothes. There was a rustling of the balloon, Bill’s lips were blue, and Alec was shivering. We were dazed by the suddenness of the change.

The next thing I felt was the sun warm on my cheek. I looked over the edge of the basket. We were only about three hundred feet up.

“What happened?” asked Bill, in a weak voice. “Did we go into Alec’s castle in the air? It was certainly a badly heated place.”

As far as we could make out we had run into vapour at a temperature of about zero. The gas had contracted,

and down we had dropped. If the sun had not warmed up the helium, we should most certainly have hit the ground. Would luck be with us another time? It was a torment to think how helpless we were.

Every detail in the scene below was clear, but of course our eyes could not sweep such a wide stretch of country as they had done at greater altitudes. The view to the north was blocked by a hill. Its height was hard to judge, for its outlines were half blurred by a sort of mist. It was perhaps four or five miles away. We should know all about it in a few minutes.

"It looks like a possible landing-place," said Alec.

We were drifting straight for it, but it was impossible as yet to say whether we were low enough to strike its side. We could not make out whether it was bare of trees. They, of course, would rip the balloon.

Bill was using the field-glasses. All at once he turned to us.

"The mist is smoke," he said. "There seems to be a bush fire at the base of the hill."

He took up the glasses again.

"It's a pretty high cliff," he went on. "Bare rock above, but plenty of trees on the lower part."

"Let's uncoil the drag rope," I said to Alec, "and throw it over. That will pull us down a little if it will reach the ground. Even if it doesn't reach now it will when we reach the slope of the hill."

The drag rope was lowered, but did not quite touch the ground. It was irritating to see the grapnel on its end skim along just above the tree-tops. Several times, indeed, it missed tall spruces only by inches.

Now we could see the smoke clearly. Every few moments it was pierced by a tongue of flame, as the fire rushed up through the branches of a spruce or jackpine.

Nearer and nearer we drifted. It looked as if we should strike the hill just between the fire and the bare cliff. We were all staring ahead.

"She's rising," cried Alec.

It was true. The nearer we got to the hill the more the balloon rose. But it seemed plain that it would not rise enough to clear the cliff. In a few seconds we should be smashed against the face of the rock. It seemed towering over us. We stared at it, helpless and fascinated. We were like Kipling's bandar log hypnotized by the great python Kaa.

I glanced at Alec and Bill. They stood rigid, with faces set and hands clenched on the ropes. They seemed pitifully young to meet death. And as I looked at them a thought rushed through my mind which made me sick with panic. Suppose we should not be killed outright, but merely maimed and crippled. Then we should lie at the foot of the cliff till the fire and smoke reached us and finished the business.

I fancy these thoughts had come and gone in a flash, but it seemed hours. Would the cliff never be reached? The smoke was all around us now. The roar and crackle of the flames were directly beneath us. The crash must come in a moment.

Our hands were jarred loose from the ropes, and we were hurled off our feet, dazed and sprawling. I scrambled up still half-stunned. We had not struck.

Through the screen of smoke I saw the cliff. And, as I looked, I was amazed, for it seemed to be receding. Had the smoke tricked my eyes? I rubbed them and stared again. Now we were swinging towards the wall, but not with the speed of a few moments ago. Then we came to a dead stop not twenty feet from the rock. What had happened?

"Look down!" shouted Alec.

I did so, but at first could see nothing. The smoke choked and blinded me. I spluttered, and tears poured from my smarting eyes. At last I saw. Our grapnel had caught near the top of a spruce. We were captives, anchored about three hundred feet above a forest fire. The flames, as far as we could make out, were only a few yards from the spruce.

For a moment nobody said anything. Then Bill said:

"What fools we were not to pull the thing in!"

There was a great crash beneath us. A giant tree had been burnt through and gone thundering to earth, smashing every obstacle in its path. High into the air, all around us, flew a shower of sparks.

"If one hits the balloon . . ." said Alec.

We stood and waited, rigid with suspense. All at once my wits came back.

"Helium won't burn," I cried.

The relief was only momentary.

"Yes, but silk will," said Bill.

A hole in the silk envelope would speedily release the gas, and down we should go into the crackling

furnace. Must we wait as helpless prisoners for the inevitable end?

Bill, with nose and mouth muffled in his scarf, was peering over the edge of the basket. He seized my arm and dragged me to his side.

"Look, see those rocks down there? That sort of ridge bare of trees?"

I nodded, but I did not see what use the ridge was to us.

"I think we could make it," Bill went on, speaking in gasps and jerks. "Why not slide down the rope to the tree and run for the ridge? We could get round the fire that way."

True, there was a chance. The fire was concentrated in a gully. If we could once reach the ridge we could work our way east and south past the flames. But there were many things against success. The flames had all but reached the spruce we were caught on. If we slid down we might find ourselves among blazing branches.

"What if the grapnel frees itself when we're on the rope?" asked Alec.

"Oh, well," answered Bill, "if the grapnel breaks loose we're going to be smashed on the rock anyway."

I was irresolute. Doubts, fears, and hopes pressed upon me.

"I'm going to try," said Bill, and swung a leg over the side.

I looked on, but said nothing. After all, was Bill not right? Was it not better to have a try for safety than to sit in the basket waiting to be burned or

mangled? Yet the thought of sliding down three hundred feet of rope made me feel weak and sick.

Bill pulled his other leg over and gradually eased his weight on to the rope. He turned towards us and seemed about to speak, but no words came. He hesitated and looked down at the long line of rope. I wondered if I should have the pluck to follow him when my turn came.

He had just begun to lower himself when Alec and I, who were anxiously watching his descent, saw a great tongue of flame rush up the spruce which held our grapnel. There was a terrible sound as of frying meat. We shouted to Bill, but he had already heard and seen. He hung motionless. As we reached our hands to him the grapnel was burned off, and we were free. We dragged him in.

“The cliff!” cried Alec.

Through the whirling smoke I could see the jagged face of the rock. We rushed to the far side of the basket. I closed my eyes.

The next thing I knew was that the smoke had cleared away and that the cliff had vanished.

CHAPTER III

A Voice from the Air

In the first moments of safety we could do nothing but stare at one another and laugh hysterically. As we calmed down, we realized what had happened. The basket had grazed the crest of the rock. The wind had, of course, been blowing up the face of the cliff, and we had gone up with it. The fire, which we had dreaded, had also been our friend. The warm rising currents of air had expanded the helium. We had bounded up just in time.

We took a drink—a very small one—of our precious water. The smoke and heat had parched our throats. After that we looked at the country below us. I was using Alec's field-glasses, and all at once was struck by a curious thing. I glanced at the compass. Yes, there was no mistake. The rivers below us were flowing north-east.

"We're over the height of land," I said.

"Well," said Bill, "we very nearly didn't get over. But what do you mean?"

I handed him the glasses and explained. Alec seemed to be busy thinking. At last he said:

"If that river down there keeps on going north-east it must empty into Hudson Bay."

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I nodded. But the mere mention of Hudson Bay was a sort of shock. It made home seem very far away. But it was no use thinking of that.

"Suppose we land fairly soon," Alec went on, "what are we going to do? I mean, where'll we head for? The Bay?"

We talked the thing over. It was a choice between going for the Bay and travelling back over the height of land to Lake Athabaska. We had a vague idea of the situation of Fort Chipewyan on the western side of the lake. But what was the use of settling our course while we were still in the air? Our plans must depend on how and where we landed. And, though we did not talk about it and did not care to admit it even to ourselves, the chances of reaching safety by any route were very slim for three boys with a handful of food and no knowledge of the country. There was nothing for it but wait and see, and in the meantime—starvation rations.

As the day wore on it became overclouded and chilly. We were dropping steadily, and once more we began to wonder about where we should come to earth. In a little while, instead of smoothly gliding through the air, we might be painfully stumbling through an endless forest towards a goal hopelessly vague and remote.

"Better study the lay of the land while we can," I said.

Bill hauled out a sheet of paper and a pencil and tried his hand at mapping. He marked in the main bodies of water and other prominent features of the country, and noted how long it took us to travel from

some clearly marked point to another. Probably none of us had any real faith in the usefulness of Bill's map, but any activity was better than sitting idly in the fading daylight.

Before darkness came we had a small meal. This saw the last of Bill's fish. The chill air had lowered us to within a couple of hundred feet of the ground. We did not like to think of what the night would bring. Daylight dangers were bad enough, but now we were to be surrounded with perils and at the same time blindfolded. Our escape the night before had been little short of miraculous. We could hardly expect such luck again. Tired, hungry, and cold, we crouched down in our corners under rugs and blankets.

Bill and Alec dozed off, but somehow I could not sleep. All the things that had happened since the guy-rope had jerked me off my feet kept whirling through my mind. Then I fell to wondering what Cochrane would say and think of the business. I began to imagine what the people at home would be doing at that moment. I amused myself by thinking of the headlines about us in the newspapers. It was the newspapers, I suppose, which made my mind jump to radio. Of course news of us would be flashed to all the northern points. Some of the little settlements over which we had passed may have known who we were. Perhaps, at this very instant, messages were travelling past us. Why should I not catch them? Had I not a radio beside me? What an idiot I had been not to think of it before! I wakened Alec and Bill.

"But we have no aerial," objected Bill.

"Oh yes, we have. There's a coil of copper wire on the outside of the basket."

In a moment it was uncoiled and hanging down. I put on the receivers and started to manipulate the dials. At first silence; then code, which I did not understand; then music. I tuned this in, and waited until it stopped to get the station. It was Winnipeg. I tried again and got Saskatoon and more music. And then at last I heard this:

"This is Station CXRX, Edmonton, calling the North. Hello, the North. Hello, Fort Simpson. Hello, Fort Smith. A balloon drifted north from here yesterday with three boys. Fort M'Murray reported by telegraph that it passed there last night going north, and travelling fast. The boys have no equipment for northern travel and are in great danger. They have very little food. If you see them pass, send out Indians with supplies. The mounted police have notified their northern patrols. Any trappers listening in who see the balloon are asked to report to the nearest trading-post. Rewards will be paid to all who help the boys. Hello, boys, if you are listening in, Professor Cochrane wants to talk to you. Stand by for Professor Cochrane."

There was a momentary pause, and then I heard Cochrane's voice.

"Hello, boys, if you can hear me. I want to tell you how to bring down the balloon. There is a valve cord hanging from the neck of the balloon above you. If you pull that it will let some gas out. You will descend slowly. When you are about twenty feet from the ground, pull the cord that comes through the

balloon near the neck. That will let you down quickly and prevent you being dragged along the ground. Don't forget that the valve cord is in the neck of the balloon. Pull it first. And now good night. Do not give up hope. We are doing all we can to get help to you. We will call you every night. Don't let your radio go, whatever else you do. Good night."

The voice stopped, and once more we were alone. The silent night was all around us. But for a minute, at any rate, I had lost that horrible feeling of isolation. Alec and Bill were, of course, impatient to know what I had heard.

"That was what Cochrane was trying to tell us when we started," said Alec. "Don't you remember how he ran towards us shouting 'pull' and 'rope'?"

Bill got out his flashlight and stood up. We were able by its light to identify the two ropes Cochrane had mentioned. We were excited and hopeful. Now at last our movements could in a measure be controlled. But, of course, we had no thought of trying to land in pitch darkness. With daylight we could pick our place, and with luck might get a chance to come down near a settlement. The question was: could we keep afloat for the rest of the night?

Presently the moon rose. By its light we saw large blotches of white mist. These, we supposed, lay above lakes. We were getting uncomfortably low. Were we to be plunged through the mist into icy water? In that event our only chance would be to stick to

the basket and trust to a wind to blow us ashore. We stood listening for the sound of waves, and shivering with suspense and cold.

Now dark clouds blotted out the moon. The air grew suddenly chillier. And there was the dash of waves. Hit by stormy gusts the basket rocked from side to side. Icy spray swept our faces. The great waves, crashing and roaring, seemed right beneath our feet. A heavier dash of spray was followed by a heavy shock. We were thrown down. A wave had broken against the basket. We scrambled to our feet and felt for one another in the darkness. The icy water ran down our backs and legs.

Bill again tried the torch. It showed huge tumbling masses of water all around us. We were barely above them. As we looked a towering wave came rolling towards us. We seemed about to be overwhelmed by it. It looked like a great moving wall. Then it broke and rushed on underneath us. To our surprise the balloon rose a little. We swept forward, straining our eyes to see what our feeble ray of light would show ahead.

"The sound's different now," shouted Bill. "They're breaking on a shore."

As he spoke black masses of rock loomed up ahead just discernible. There was a crash. The basket turned over. We were hurled sprawling on the ground. At the same instant we heard a tearing, ripping sound above us. Down came the balloon envelope, half smothering us in its folds.

We shouted to each other and found that bruises

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were our only injuries. We had struck a tree. The basket was lying on its side.

We were safe on land, but were wet, miserably cold, and hungry. Cautiously we started to get our bearings. To right and left and in front waves splashed and thundered. We were apparently on a point of rock. After stumbling about for a few minutes we decided to stay where we were till morning. The upturned basket gave us some shelter from the wind, but we were half-frozen in our drenched clothes.

At last the wind died down a little and the moon came out. Now we could move about with safety. We were on a table of rock about forty feet wide and about thirty feet above the water. A single tree stood on the headland, and against that we had crashed. In its branches were the tangled shreds of what had been a balloon. Behind us a grove of spruce trees blocked the view.

"Firewood!" said Alec, making for the trees. We followed him and had soon gathered a pile of dead branches. Out of his pocket Alec drew a little bottle containing matches, and we soon had a crackling fire. We stripped off some of our clothes and held them in front of the blaze.

"Better do without a meal till we see where we are," I suggested, and Bill and Alec ruefully agreed.

We gathered more wood and settled down to wait for daylight. Soon the warmth, the sense of comparative safety, and fatigue made us forget everything else, and we slept.

CHAPTER IV

In which we have to use our Wits

It was broad daylight before we stirred. The fire had gone out. We were stiff and bruised and faint from hunger. The sun was glittering on a calm smiling lake. No sign remained of the storm except the upset basket and the rent balloon. Apparently we were on the north side of the lake. The southern shore looked hazy in the distance. It must have been fully twenty miles away. Certainly luck had been on our side. If we had landed in the middle of that great stretch of water our chances of reaching shore would have been very slim indeed.

Of course the first thing was to look over our stuff and see what damage had been done. The rugs and blankets were still heavy with wet from the waves which had drenched us just before the crash. We soon had them spread out on the rocks. None of the food had been lost or spoiled. But when we gathered it together it looked a woefully small pile.

"These will have to feed us," said Alec, pointing to the rifle, shot-gun, and fishing-tackle.

They were all uninjured, though the ammunition had been scattered about.

"Every cartridge may mean a meal," I said, as we picked them up from the crevices in the rocks.

"Or a week of meals," added Alec, "if we get a deer."

Bill was examining the gramophone.

"Five records broken," he announced.

"It sounds like the Olympic Games," said Alec.

"If you're not careful," said Bill, in disgust, "there'll be other things besides records broken."

The surviving record was violent jazz, a fox trot entitled "When the Flapper's Shingle Starts to Curl".

"Your taste or Cochrane's?" asked Alec.

"Oh, that's the kind of thing the Professor likes. He finds it a rest after working in his lab."

Our ignorance of the scientific instruments which had been in the basket was such that we could hardly tell whether they had been seriously damaged or not. Anyway it did not matter. We could not have used them.

So far so good, but we had not escaped scot free. The tin of canned heat had been smashed, and when Alec opened the radio he stared at it in dismay. Every tube was broken. No sooner had we found its value than it had been snatched away from us. Whatever efforts were made to rescue us, we should now know nothing of them. We were helpless to co-operate with our friends. Once and for all we were cut off from civilization.

"Well, that ends that," said Bill. "It might have been no use anyway. I don't see how we could have

travelled according to Cochrane's directions when we don't know where on earth we are."

Bill was putting a brave face on the matter, and Alec and I played up to him.

"If the three of us can't get out of this mess now," said Alec, "then we couldn't have done it with the radio."

By now we had looked at almost everything of importance. The next thing to consider was a meal.

"Do you think you could get a fish, Bill?" I asked. "We had better start living off the country at once. Alec and I will rustle some wood."

Bill was never too hungry or tired to fish. He soon had his tackle ready and set out to find a likely spot. At the end of the point the rock went down sheer. We left Bill to try his luck there and rejoined him as soon as we had gathered a pile of wood.

"One bite," he reported. Bill never said much when fishing. He gave his whole mind to the business in hand.

I had always been keen enough about the sport, but I came to see that fishing for fun and fishing to keep off starvation are two different things. When, a few minutes later, Bill hooked a good-sized trout, I was excited enough to satisfy any angler. Bill played the fish with infinite care until it was completely exhausted, for it had to be pulled up the straight face of the rock. Would it flop off? Alec and I stood ready to pounce as soon as it should appear over the edge. But Bill had done his work well. The trout hadn't a jump left in him.

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"Here's a breakfast," shouted Alec, when he had got his fingers through the gills. "I'll clean him. Get the fire going."

"Have you any matches?" I said to Bill.

"No, they're in my pack."

We got the box out. All the top layers had been spoiled by wet. This was a worse business than the broken radio. Anxiously we fished out the other little box from Alec's pack. That had fared no better. Not half the matches were dry. In addition, there were those Alec had in the little bottle.

"One match has got to do it," said Bill, as he whittled shavings for kindling.

The trout was soon in the pan, and soon out of it. As we sat picking the last shreds from the bones, we told Alec about the matches.

"Let's count the good ones," he said.

We found we had nineteen. These were put into a tobacco tin, which was among Cochrane's supplies. The wet ones we spread on the rocks in the sun, but out of the wind. Alec built a stone fireplace round the remains of our breakfast fire and put in more wood.

"As long as we're here," he said, "we'll keep the fire going and save matches."

"I wonder how long that's going to be," said Bill.

"Suppose Alec and I explore a bit to see what kind of a place it is," I suggested. "You can be laying in a supply of fish, Bill."

This was at once agreed to. Alec took the shot gun on the chance of getting a partridge, and we at once

headed north into the spruce grove. I carried an axe to blaze the trail.

The underbrush was not thick, and it would have been very pleasant going but for one thing—mosquitoes. In the first part of the night the strong wind from the south had driven them inland. Later, when the wind had died down, we had been so tired that even mosquitoes had not been able to keep us awake. Alec had complained of them while he was cleaning the fish. But all this was nothing compared with what they were in the bush. There was a humming like that of a sawmill. We were kept busy slapping face, neck, and hands. Alec made a headdress of his scout scarf and tucked the lower edge inside his shirt, but, even so, he was worse off than I was, for he was wearing shorts.

We kept going as briskly as we could, blazing the trail as we went. Not a sign of game. The only living things were two or three small birds and a couple of squirrels. The mosquitoes were becoming intolerable.

"Do you think it's any use going on?" asked Alec.

"It looks more open just ahead there," I said.

"Let's go that far and then turn back."

At that moment we were standing on low ground. We climbed a little slope, went on a few yards, and then stopped dead. There was no question of going on now. Just in front of us between the trunks and branches of the spruce trees was blue water. A few steps farther, and we were standing on the shore, and looking across two miles of rippling waves.

"We're on an island," said Alec.

"It certainly looks like it," I said. "But let's make sure. You go to the left, and I'll go to the right. Stick to the water's edge, and then there'll be no fear of getting lost."

"All right; and if the shore doesn't lead us round to Bill in an hour or so, we'll meet here again."

We marked the spot and set out. It was slow work scrambling over rocks and dodging under branches. But soon there was no room for doubt. The shore was gradually curving southwards. After about half an hour I was at the eastern end of the island, and presently was making my way along the southern shore. I rounded a point, and there ahead of me was the solitary spruce tree holding in its branches the torn balloon. Near it stood Bill fishing.

"Well, what luck, and where's Alec?" he asked, as I came up.

"He'll be along in a few minutes."

"How far did you go?" went on Bill. "What's the country like? Did you see any game?"

"We didn't go very far, Bill. This is an island."

Bill whistled at this news, and was so disturbed that he failed to hook a trout which struck at that moment. While he was still getting used to the idea, Alec came along from the west.

"Have you told Bill?" he asked.

I nodded.

"How are we going to get to the mainland?" asked Bill bluntly.

We sat down to talk the matter over. All the possible plans were discussed. We could, of course, stick to

the island, build a shelter, and live on fish, which, judging by Bill's catch, were very plentiful. But that would get us no nearer home. And what about the winter? No, we must get off the island, and we must take some things with us. That necessity ruled out swimming.

"What about a raft?" asked Alec. "We have two axes, rope, and plenty of wood."

The scheme was certainly possible, and for the moment nothing better occurred to us. Then Bill, who had been silent for some time, said:

"Why not use the basket?"

"Leak like a sieve with three people in her," objected Alec.

"Yes, but not if we cover her with the balloon silk."

It was worth trying. Bill climbed the spruce and set to work disentangling the balloon. As soon as that was done, we spread the silk on a level rock near the water, and inspected it carefully. Except for the big rents it seemed sound enough. The basket was now placed on the silk and swathed in it. The covering was bound on with ropes, and the excess silk was tucked inside. She was ready to launch.

This was a matter of some delicacy if the rock was to be kept from tearing the silk. At last she was floating and gently tugging at her painter.

"Rather high in the water," I said.

"Oh, she's all right," said Bill. "Look."

He stepped in, and the basket tilted over away from the rock. As Bill tried to right it it dipped swiftly to

the other side, and out he went. Up he came, grinning and spluttering.

"Nothing like a swim to give you an appetite," he gasped. "Why don't you slackers come in?"

We contented ourselves with helping him out of the icy water. While he was getting warm and dry by the fire we talked of how to make the basket seaworthy. The solution of the difficulty was due to Alec.

"Tie a log along each side," he said, "and it can't tip."

It did not take long to find suitable logs. Two dead spruce about twenty feet long were near at hand. They were soon trimmed and hauled to the water's edge. The next question was how to fasten them in their places. We tied two ropes four feet apart to one log. Then we shoved the ropes down in the water and floated the basket over them. The ropes were then fastened round the other log. After that we put on crosspieces.

"Now, Bill, you and Alec get in."

When they were both in, the basket was sufficiently depressed for the logs to float up along the sides. Short ropes were used to bind them to the ropes which held the silk covering.

"She seems steady enough," said Alec, when this operation was completed. "And no sign of a leak."

They hopped out, and we tied the painter to a rock.

"Now some paddles," said Alec.

While he and Bill were busy shaping rough spruce paddles I got another meal of fish ready, for by this

time it was late afternoon. I examined the matches we had spread on the rock. They were useless. A few minutes later I called the boys to supper.

"Where shall we head for?" asked Bill, between bites.

"The north shore of the lake is only two miles away," I said. "I'd rather walk round half the lake than risk a twenty-mile cruise in the open water."

The rest of the day was spent at the paddles. As we worked we made our plans. We would start early in the morning if the wind was from the south. Once on the mainland we would go west till we had cleared the lake, and then south. Further details we left unsettled.

Before dark the paddles were finished. We made a smudge thick enough to discourage even the hardest mosquito, and in its shelter we slept as only tired boys can.

Alec was first out of his blankets.

"Wind from the south," he called. "Look alive!"

Breakfast—trout again, of course—was soon over. We began to load up. The radio and the broken gramophone records we left, but practically everything else we bundled in. No doubt we should have to abandon things later.

"What about christening the old tub?" asked Bill, when almost everything was in.

It seemed only the decent thing to do. If I remember rightly it was Alec who hit upon the name—the *Northern Hamper*.

"We haven't a bottle to break over the bows," said

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Bill, "and anyway she hasn't got any bows; so I suppose we might as well be off."

Alec stepped in and I followed him. Bill handed me one or two small things which had been overlooked.

"Put this in a safe place," he said. It was the tobacco box containing our matches. Just as my fingers were ready to close on it the basket tilted slightly away, and the tin fell between Bill and me. Off jumped the lid; the tin rolled down the rock, and our matches were in the water.

"Butterfingers!" said Bill, but with extraordinary mildness. He retrieved the matches, which were floating in a sort of bundle as if glued together.

I did not know what to say. My wretched clumsiness had in an instant enormously increased our difficulties. All I could do was to stammer apologies.

"Oh, well, don't drop them again," said Bill.

He stepped in as he spoke. I anxiously examined the matches. They were all stuck together and felt curiously slippery. You would not have known they had been in the water.

"I'm glad now," said Bill, "that when you two fellows were exploring yesterday I melted the candle over the matches."

CHAPTER V

The First Cruise of the “ Northern Hamper ”

It was hard to get clear of the island. The wind from the south, which was to take us to the mainland, was now driving us inshore. With our clumsy paddles we crept along until at last we reached the western tip of the island, and could take advantage of the breeze.

“ Hoist the sail,” shouted Alec.

The sail was a blanket fastened to the two scout staves. We steered with a long sweep made out of a dead spruce. Now that we were able to run before the wind we made fair speed. The mainland drew steadily nearer. We could see steep rocky cliffs and small bays, but no good landing-place.

When we were close in we lowered the sail and once more took to the paddles. Slowly we moved along the shore looking for a beach. Just ahead was a jutting point of rock. As we rounded it we saw an opening into what appeared to be a narrow bay. Here we might find what we wanted. We put new force into our paddling.

“ We’re sending her along now,” said Alec.

We rested for a moment, but, even with our paddles lifted, the hamper moved steadily on.

"It's not a bay; it's a river," shouted Bill.

We had turned quickly to the left and were on a swift current—one of the outlets of the lake. We were gaining speed rapidly, indeed, we were soon rushing along at a rate which was perilous, considering how little control we had over our awkward boat. Landing was out of the question. The banks were high and there was no beach. We were in a sort of canyon.

Several times we tried to paddle close in and to clutch the rock. But we never succeeded in getting a firm grip. We were swept along between the two walls, just as much the playthings of the water as we had been of the air.

We did not cease our efforts. At every place which promised the slightest chance of landing we did our best to check our headlong rush but always the current was too strong.

After about a quarter of a mile we noticed that the channel was widening and the current slackening. Then an unwelcome sound was borne upstream—the sound of rapids. We fully realized the danger, but somehow it was less terrifying than the perils of the air. It was at least a more familiar sort of risk. We did not welcome it, but we did not feel panicky. The basket rode high and should stand a fair chance.

We swung round a bend, saw the white water flung into the air, and raced on. The stream had widened still more; but the shores were just as rugged.

In midstream a small rocky island—a stunted tree

or two on a pile of rocks—divided the rushing water. We were just about to pass it, when the end of one of our side-logs hit a stone. We swung round and grounded on the island.

Looking about we saw that we could not possibly swim to either bank. There was nothing for it but to shove off and shoot the rest of the rapid. We looked over the ropes. Everything was taut.

Bill and I got out into the water, which swirled about our knees. To get the end of the boat free was hard work, for the current was constantly pressing it against the rock. Prying with the paddles at last moved her. She swung round.

“Jump in, Bill,” I shouted, as I tumbled aboard myself.

But Bill’s foot slipped. He clutched for the edge of the basket, missed it, and in an attempt to regain his balance sat down in shallow water. The gap between him and us widened swiftly. Alec tossed a rope, but it fell short. We were as helpless as he was. Wet with spray, jerked this way and that, the *Hamper* rushed on. A hundred yards farther downstream it swept to the left, and Bill was lost to sight.

CHAPTER VI

A is an Archer

On we rushed, light and helpless as a cork in the wild torrent. At one moment we were in midstream; at another we almost grazed one of the rocky shores. For an instant the basket would race straight forward; then, caught in a whirlpool, it would spin like a top till we were dizzy. Yet the danger was like wine to our blood. We were more troubled by the thought of Bill than by the chances of disaster to ourselves.

The descent was quickly over. We were riding now on quieter water and between slightly lower banks. The river had widened still more. It was soon easy to make a landing on the right bank.

Now for rescuing Bill. Our first task was to scramble up to the top of the bank. This was no easy matter, but with each other's help we at last got there. We began to make our way upstream. Spruce trees lined the bank, and we had to clamber under and over windfalls. In the worst tangles of underbush and branches we had to use the axe. We made better speed on the occasional rocky terraces. At last we arrived opposite Bill's island.

There he was, sitting dejectedly, his hands clasped

round his knees. We shouted, but he could not hear. Our voices were drowned in the roar of the water. The walls of the canyon were about fifty feet high at this point. Presently Bill looked up and saw us. At once he jumped to his feet and waved his arms.

Alec tied his scarf to one stick, his handkerchief to another, and signalled:

“Don’t worry. We’ll get you off somehow.”

Bill soon had a pair of flags too, and sent back an answer:

“Go to it.”

But how were we to rescue him? The small rocky island was separated from us by about 125 feet of rushing foaming water. Swimming in the rapids was not to be thought of.

“If we could only throw him a rope we could pull him in,” Alec shouted in my ear.

“Can you throw a rope that far?” I asked. “And even if you could, he would be carried downstream and knocked to pieces before we could haul him in.”

I pointed to the rocks over which the rapids were leaping and breaking.

For a while we sat and thought in silence, looking at Bill across the barrier of tossing waves. Presently Alec got up, went to the extreme edge of the cliff, and lay down. I could see that he had formed a plan. In a moment or two he beckoned me to lie down beside him.

“See that ledge down there?” he said, pointing.

About ten feet above the water and about forty

feet below us was a narrow rocky platform, drenched with spray. I nodded, but failed to see how the ledge was to save Bill.

"If we could get a rope fastened there, I could get a rope to Bill," Alec said.

He outlined his plan. It was a wild enough idea, but it seemed worth trying. At any rate I had nothing better to suggest. Alec picked up his flags again:

"We're going away for a little while. We have a plan. Back soon."

"I'll wait," signalled Bill.

Back to the *Hamper* we went and unloaded her. We stripped her clean of rope, even of the rope which held the silk on. We did not know how much we might need. We also took the fishing-tackle, a couple of Bill's trout, and the rifle for protection against unforeseen dangers.

We were back within an hour. Bill, who had been eagerly watching the bank, followed our every movement with interest.

Alec now gathered a number of sticks of various sizes. Some were curved like boomerangs. He tried to throw them to Bill's island, but all fell short. I had no better luck.

"Well, so much for plan number one," said Alec. "Now for two."

He picked up the axe, climbed down into a gully and was soon chopping away at a straight young spruce. I confess I had no great faith in Alec's scheme, and, if it failed, what else could we try? If we were on the opposite shore we might be better off. The

island was nearer to it. But, on the other hand, the cliffs looked higher there. We might go back to the head of the rapids by land, build a raft, and try to hit the island as the basket had done. But the chances were it would miss. Steering was impossible in that water. Many other plans still less likely to succeed passed through my mind as I stood looking at Bill with the roar of the waters in my ears.

I did not hear Alec approach. In his hand he held a bow and arrow. They looked rather rough and ready, but might be good enough for the purpose. Our lightest fishing-line was now tied to the arrow. Alec coiled as much of the line as he thought necessary. Again he talked to Bill with his flags:

"Here goes. Be ready to grab it."

He fitted the arrow to the string, drew it back as far as he dared, and let it fly.

The line swiftly uncoiled. The arrow hit the water quite close to the island, and of course was at once swept down stream. Bill was full of excitement.

Alec hauled in and carefully coiled his line again. Then he shot once more, but at a higher angle. This time the arrow dropped far short.

"The line is wet," he said. "We'll have to dry it."

I collected twigs and dead spruce boughs, and soon the line was strung up in front of a blaze. While I was doing this, Alec was making another bow. If the first broke, we should not lose time. There was also the chance that his second might be better. When at last the line was dry and the new bow fashioned, Alec made another attempt. This time the arrow

carried right past the upper part of the island. Bill pounced and grabbed the line.

So far so good. Now we attached to the line some of the cordage which had formed the network of the balloon envelope. Alec signalled to Bill to haul away. This he did, and the cordage reached him safely. Our long drag rope was next attached. But this was not so easy for Bill to pull. We had been able to keep the light cord fairly taut, but the heavy rope sagged down and down until it reached the water. Then the tug was so great that we feared the cord which Bill held would break.

Slowly the rope was paid out; farther and farther downstream it went. The more rope touched the water the greater the strain. We could see Bill bracing himself as the pull increased. Once or twice it seemed as if he must let go or be dragged into the water.

Then we saw him rest, and the rope slackened a bit. He signalled to us to keep paying out. As there was plenty of rope, we did as he wished. Now Bill changed his position. Instead of pulling straight across the current he allowed the rope to go downstream, and, facing round that way himself, he began to pull again. Apparently the strain was now lessened. Once he should get hold of the end of the drag rope all danger of breaking would be past. At last the rope end jerked into view. Anxiously we watched it draw nearer his hands. He got it safely, and, staggering back, secured it to a rugged spruce tree. Then he sat down as if exhausted.

While Bill rested, we made our preparations for the

next part of the scheme. We found a suitable tree near the edge of the cliff and stripped off a collar of bark near the roots. A bowline was placed under Alec's arms, and a turn of the rope taken round the tree where we had stripped it. Then I gradually lowered Alec towards the wet rocky ledge, about ten feet above the stream. The rate of his descent I controlled by snubbing.

The rope went slack in my hands. Alec had reached the ledge. I tied the rope to the tree and leaned over. He was examining the place very carefully. But the cliff was overhanging, and hid part of his movements from my sight. In a few moments he signalled to me, and I lowered the shore end of the drag rope. The other end was on the island.

Alec now fastened the drag rope, evidently to a projecting rock. I could not see exactly how, for he was on the hidden part of the ledge. Then he picked up his flags, which he had taken down to the ledge with him.

"Fasten your end to the spruce," he signalled to Bill.

This was soon done, and now a fairly taut rope stretched from shore to island about ten or fifteen feet above the water. This was Bill's road to safety.

All this had been child's play compared with the long crawl on a swaying rope over foaming rapids. The rope, we knew would stand the strain, but what about Bill's nerves and muscles?

Alec sent a last signal:

"Good luck, Bill."

Bill jerked on the rope several times as he hung suspended just by the water's edge. Apparently satisfied with its strength, he started on his slow and dangerous journey. Steadily he moved out over the tumbling water, a slight dangling figure. His arms looked as thin as pieces of string. If they failed, he was done for.

Now he had gone a quarter of the way. The rope was sagging considerably under his weight. Bill stopped, threw a leg over, and rested. In a few moments he was again on the move.

It was quite clear that it was going to be a close thing. The rope was sinking more and more, and he was not yet half-way. Even if his arms held out, he might not be able to keep out of the water.

On he came. He had now thrown both legs over the rope and was pulling himself forward. At last he reached the middle. The water was only a few inches below his back and seemed to leap up towards him eagerly. Once indeed, as he rested there, a wave did hit him, drenching him with icy water. But he hung on; then he crawled a few feet farther and again rested—for several minutes this time.

He glanced towards us. His face was pale and drawn. The strain had told heavily upon him.

It seemed to us as if he would never start again. But finally he began to crawl forward. The hardest part of the journey was still ahead. His course was now uphill. To make matters worse, the rope was fastened at a higher level on the shore than on the island.

He crept on with increasing slowness. The rope was too thin to give a very good grip. Soon he was resting again. I waved encouragement to him as he looked up. He was only about thirty feet from the ledge, but each foot had to be won by painful effort. He gave me a wan smile.

Once more he started and gained perhaps six feet before stopping. He seemed ready to drop off from exhaustion. Then another crawl, and another halt. He had cut down the distance to about a dozen feet.

He gathered himself together for a last effort. He was now climbing at a very steep angle.

Alec swiftly undid the bow-line from round himself, and signalled to me to give him more slack. Then he retied the bow-line. Now he had a loose end of rope. In this he tied a loop and lowered it over the ledge.

Bill desperately clutched it and Alec pulled with all his might. At last Bill's hands came over the ledge, then his head and shoulders. A second more and he lay in a heap on the narrow platform.

I could not help cheering. Of course, no one could hear, but it relieved my feelings.

We still had to get Bill up. Apparently he was completely exhausted. He lay limp and helpless. Alec placed the bow-line round him and signalled to me to pull away. But to drag Bill's dead weight up forty feet was a very different matter from Alec's helping him up the last six feet on to the ledge.

At first I could not budge him. My second attempt

brought him up a foot, but he slipped back. The thing was hopeless.

I lay down and looked over the cliff. Bill was now sitting up. They both looked serious enough at the prospect of being stuck on the narrow unsheltered strip of rock. It was now beginning to get dark. If they were to be rescued I had to do it. Several ideas came into my mind only to be discarded.

Finally a more promising one suggested itself. I undid the bowline rope from the tree, passed it behind the trunk, and lowered the loose end to Alec. The bowline was still on Bill. I signalled to Alec to pull on the loose end and pulled myself. With two of us at work Bill was soon up. He had just strength enough to help me bring Alec to the top. Once more the three of us were together.

It was now too late to return to our landing-place. Bill was in no condition to stumble over rocks and trees in the dark. There was nothing for it but to light a fire and settle down for the night.

We soon had a blaze going in a sheltered nook. Bill's clothes were hung up to dry, and in the meantime Alec lent him his shorts and I stripped off my shirt. The mosquitoes soon discovered our half-naked bodies, and we were glad when Bill's things were dry.

After a meal of fish cooked in the ashes we built up the fire and lay down to sleep. We were too tired to discuss what our next step was to be.

We were roused at dawn by a gentle rain on our faces.

"Let's get back to the *Hamper*," said Alec. "None of our stuff is protected from the wet."

Bill and I were beginning to gather up the few things we had brought. We were just coiling the rope which had been used for the bow-line when Bill said:

"It's a pity to leave the drag-rope, but I don't see how we're going to unloosen the end on the island."

Rope is an endlessly useful thing, and it was our longest and best piece.

"Hello, where's Alec gone?" asked Bill.

Before I could answer a rifle shot rang out. It was followed by a second. There was Alec lying on the brink of the cliff firing at something in the canyon.

Bill and I rushed forward in alarm. Just as we reached him Alec shot again. We saw the far end of the rope fall from the tree. Alec smiled.

"We haven't lost the drag-rope yet," he said.

CHAPTER VII

The Land of Little Sticks

In a few minutes the rope had been retrieved and we were on our way to the landing-place. Our things there were safe but wet. We managed, however, to ferret out some dry wood, and Alec was justly proud when he started the fire with one match. As we ate trout under the lee of a rocky wall and with our feet to the blazing branches, we forgot the persistent drizzle.

"Now to settle our plans," I said.

The choice, of course, was between going south overland, as we had planned on the island, and continuing our course downstream.

"I've had enough of rapids," said Bill. "Probably there are falls ahead, and anyway we don't know where the river goes to."

Certainly we had not had much luck so far in the basket. But, on the other hand, travelling by water was swift and easy compared with crawling along with a pack on your back.

"I'm with Bill," said Alec. "Every step south is a step nearer home."

That settled the matter, though my heart sank when

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I thought of the number of steps which lay between us and safety. It seemed to me that we could not be less than eight hundred miles from Edmonton, but I kept these misgivings to myself.

The decision was to aim at Lake Athabaska. If we were lucky enough to reach its shores we were to build a raft and try for Fort Chipewayan. By means of rafts also we hoped to cross the lakes and rivers which barred our route.

"It's a good thing you saved the drag-rope, Alec," said Bill.

We fell to talking of what we were to take and what to leave. All the blankets, all the food, which was little enough, and the two axes were, of course, to go. The scientific instruments and the gramophone were equally obvious things to abandon. The rifle and shotgun caused some debate. They would be heavy on a long march aside from the ammunition, and yet starvation would be worse than tired shoulders. We compromised by leaving part of the ammunition. The fishing-tackle, on which we were also relying for food, was, of course, very light. We decided to take enough of the balloon silk to make a sort of shelter.

During our discussion differences of opinion had shown themselves. It was this, I fancy, which led Bill to propose that we choose a leader. The lot fell upon me as the eldest. It was to be my duty to decide when we should start and halt, and any other questions in which there might be disagreement. When all these things had been settled it was late afternoon. Bill caught two more fish to use on the first day's march.

“ Well, if I’m going to be scoutmaster,” I said, “ my first order is ‘ bed ’.”

But though the rain had stopped, and though we lay comfortably on sloping ground, excitement as to what the next day would bring kept us long awake. At last I dropped off.

“ Who’s for a dip?” called Alec, pulling off from our faces the mosquito-nets we had made of balloon silk. I seemed to have been asleep but a moment.

The morning was bright and clear. After a plunge in the river—and in that icy water one plunge was enough—we felt ready for anything. As soon as breakfast was over the things to be discarded were piled up and the basket placed over them. Bill stuck a notice on the side:

This basket was left here by

JIM THOMSON,
ALEC BRADFORD,
and
BILL BECKWITH.

Help yourself. Good Hunting!
25th May, 192—.

The packs were soon made up. We took a last look around to be sure that nothing valuable had been left.

“ Well, I’m ready,” said Bill, settling his shoulder-straps comfortably.

“ How far do you think we should go in a day?” I asked him.



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AT LAST HE REACHED THE MIDDLE

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"About thirty miles," he answered.

"Well, you're hopeful."

"If the Fort is four hundred miles away," said Alec, "we should make it in two or three weeks."

As they talked and laughed a picture flashed through my mind of the dense tangled forests over which the balloon had glided so swiftly, but which would make every yard of our march slow and toilsome.

We climbed the bank above our camp and passed through the clumps of stunted fir trees. Beyond these was open country.

"Take the lead, Alec; you're a good hand with the compass."

The sun was low in the sky directly ahead. A few clear bird-notes were in the air, and we were stepping homewards. Alec and Bill might be reckless optimists as to our rate of progress, but it was hard not to feel buoyant and cheerful.

Before us was a rolling plain somewhat like the prairies, but the rolls were of rock. It stretched as far as we could see. Here and there were dotted small clumps of trees from eight to twelve feet in height. Some of them were a foot through at the base.

We stared with interest at this strange monotonous landscape. It was different from anything we had ever seen. Suddenly there sprang into my mind the phrase "the land of little sticks". Was that where we were? Had we been dumped down in that fringe of stunted trees called "the last woods"? If so, then to the north of us there must lie the dreary treeless waste of the barren grounds.

Alec set a good pace, and there was no underbrush. The river was soon a couple of miles behind us.

"This is going to be a great hike," said Bill.

We had climbed several slight rises and crossed some shallow valleys. A deeper one now lay immediately in front. As we descended into it clouds of mosquitoes swarmed around us. The air seemed lifeless, and the heat was oppressive.

"Rest when we climb the far side," I said.

We pushed on, but some of the spring had gone out of our step. However, when we reached the high ground once more, a fresh breeze blew in our faces, and the mosquitoes were less troublesome. We glanced back. The trees clothing the river bank were still clearly visible.

"Well, we've made a start," said Alec, "but that's about all."

Again the packs were slipped on, and again we turned our faces to the south. There was no sound, as we trudged along, but the scrape of our feet on the rock. The absence of underbrush had at first been welcome, but now we were paying for our freedom. All three of us had ordinary leather boots. On the rocky slopes they were forever betraying us at the very moment we needed a firm stance. While stumbling up one of these places Alec slipped and came down on his bare knee. Soon afterwards I noticed that he had begun to limp.

He did not complain and tried not to slacken the pace; but Bill and I had also lost our freshness. The growing heat, the lack of shade, the mosquitoes, all

helped to tire and irritate us. Even worse than these things was the dull blank immense monotony of the rocky desert, broken only by occasional grassy hollows and miserable stunted trees. The sameness of the landscape made it difficult to believe that we were advancing. There was nothing to lure us on.

About noon we stopped to eat by a small stream. We cooked a trout over a fire of moss, a fuel, we soon found, which was very quickly consumed. As soon as the fish was fried we turned the fire into a smudge. For a few minutes at any rate the mosquitoes were worsted. They had been thronging around the abrasion on Alec's knee. At my suggestion he protected it with a strip of the balloon silk.

All through the afternoon he moved stiffly. It was almost dusk when we reached another small stream.

"What about camping?" asked Bill.

The water was not deep, but cool and clear. Along the banks were groups of stunted willows.

Packs were soon off, and feet were bathed in the stream.

"Well," said Bill, "travelling by air had one advantage. It didn't do this to you."

He held up his foot. On the back of the heel was a large blister. That and Alec's knee did not promise well for to-morrow. On this, our first day, we had covered at most twelve miles. I thought of the hundreds of miles which still had to be trudged.

A small fire of willow was soon kindled. While our last trout was frying over it, Alec remarked:

"If we don't catch or shoot something to-morrow we'll have to dig into our reserves."

We were hoarding the bacon, sausages, and the two tins of pork and beans. Unless we could supplement them, they would not take us very far. Very reluctantly we saved half the fish for breakfast.

On the low ground by the stream the mosquitoes were especially bad. After we had drunk all the water we liked and eaten all the trout we dared, we put up our silk shelter on the top of a little hill a couple of hundred yards to the south. We carried enough fire with us to start a smudge.

"It feels and looks as if it might rain," said Bill as we lay gasping in the smoke.

"It'd be cooler for walking," said Alec.

"Yes, but mosquitoes don't mind rain."

After we had turned in I lay awake for some time thinking of the difficulties ahead of us. If twelve miles was the best we could do in the open country, what would be our pace in the forest? Was our whole attempt to reach Fort Chipewayan mere madness? How long should we persist in going south if our troubles increased? That was for me as leader to decide; and the responsibility weighed heavily upon me. At last I fell asleep.

It seemed only a moment later when I was awakened. In that country the nights in May are very short. The first sound I heard was the hum of mosquitoes. A dull muggy morning had made them worse than ever. Bill's prophecy of rain seemed about to come true.

Breakfast saw the end of the fish. Then I made a suggestion.

"Let's see if there isn't something we can get rid of. If we could only lighten the packs we could make better time."

As we spread our things out on a rock, Alec gave an exclamation:

"That can be left," he said in disgust.

It was the sausages. The heat had been too much for them, and our noses told us they were now unfit for eating. We looked at each other in dismay. Four or five good meals had been lost. We had played safe on Lake Athabaska, and, as a result, had missed our chance. Now, once again, we had been cautious, and again we had lost.

"If we don't look out," said Alec, "the bacon will be gone too. I vote we have it to-day."

I agreed to this, but it raised a serious question. If we continued to have no luck fishing or shooting, how far should we push on?

"If we get no fish or game to-day," I said, "we ought to turn back to-morrow."

The question of food had made us forget the lightening of the packs. But, when we came to grips with the matter, there seemed nothing which could be spared. The heaviest item, the ammunition, was now more necessary than ever.

"I'm not going to lug these any farther," said Bill, holding up the field-glasses. "They're only a nuisance."

Before slipping on our packs we loaded both shotgun and rifle. We could not afford to miss any chances

of game. Except that it was less sunny and that the mosquitoes were, if possible, more tormenting, the second day's journey was like the first. We toiled up rocky inclines; we slipped down into grassy hollows. From each rise we saw the same depressing infinite stretch of stony barren prairie. Hardly a word was spoken. There was an occasional irritated exclamation which told of raw nerves. I felt that we could not go far under these conditions.

The billy cans had been filled at the stream. Even this trifling addition to our load was an annoyance. In spite of all our care some water got joggled out when we stumbled. What was left was soon lukewarm. No sign of streams or game.

Alec was still in the lead, limping but going at a fair pace. Bill followed, and it was easy to see that his blister was bothering him, though he said nothing about it. All at once there was a whirr and rush of wings, and Alec shot. The bird dropped a few feet ahead.

"It looks like a ptarmigan," said Alec, picking it up.

"Whatever it is, it helps out the bacon," I said.

We went on in better spirits. There was no wind, but masses of dark grey clouds were piling up overhead. Towards noon a few big drops spattered on our faces. Before long it was raining steadily.

Presently we stopped for a meal and put up the shelter. It was not easy to get a fire going in the wet, and, when we did, it was a poor smoky affair. However, it half-fried the bacon.

"What about waiting for the rain to end?" asked Alec.

The three of us sat huddled up under the shelter with the smudge smoke pouring into our faces. But soon inaction became intolerable. No smudge was a match for the mosquitoes. We decided to move on.

"My pack weighs about a ton," said Bill presently.

"So does mine," said Alec.

"And mine."

The reason dawned on me. Our blankets were rolled up and fastened to the top of our packs. They were now drenched. But nothing could be done. One pair might have been protected, if we had thought of it, by a piece of balloon silk. We plodded on till late afternoon. When it was almost dusk, we came on a stream.

The night was comfortless. We used as many matches as we dared in trying to start a fire, but all in vain. Not a scrap of wood could be found, and the moss was sodden. We had no supper, and, what was worse, no smudge. The blankets could not be used. Our feet were sore from the wet socks. We sat in misery till morning, and for once the night did not seem short.

At last the sun rose and showed us a cloudless sky. Blankets and shirts were at once spread out on the rocks. We set to work to find dry fuel and at length succeeded. The feeble beginnings of the fire were anxiously nursed and coaxed along. What worried us most was that we had now only six matches left.

"Look here," said Alec, "we've got to carry fire with us. We can't afford to use any more matches."

"What are you going to carry it in?" I asked.

"This," he returned, holding up one of the billy cans. With his knife he punched four holes in the

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sides near the bottom large enough to make a draught. He put some embers from the fire in it and added moss. The scheme seemed to work well enough.

As soon as the blankets were half-dry we started. After the dismal rain of the day before we were all cheered by the sunshine and pushed on gaily. Alec was in the lead slowly climbing one of the countless rocky slopes. At the top he suddenly stopped.

“Hurry up!” he shouted.

In a moment we were beside him. Ahead of us the ground sloped gently down for about twenty yards. Beyond that was water—miles of it. Looking southward we could see no land.

CHAPTER VIII

Wind and Calm

We hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry. The unchanging barren rock country had so wearied and depressed us that we were eager for anything different. Yet the lake barred our way. It stretched for miles and miles to right and left. We had to cross this new obstacle or turn north again.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Bill, as we stood on the beach.

"Well, let's have a swim first," said Alec, stripping off his shirt.

After a bathe and a meal off Alec's ptarmigan we faced our problem. There were two clear-cut alternatives—to try our luck on a raft, or to trudge north again and journey downstream in the basket. We had no illusions about the raft. We knew that it would be almost wholly at the mercy of the wind. We were entirely ignorant of the size of the lake. If we were becalmed in the middle of the great stretch of water we might be in a bad way. To none of these considerations did we shut our eyes, but what told with us more than any of these things was the thought of once more

tramping north with sore feet and amid clouds of mosquitoes.

"I'll take back all the nasty things I said about water-travel," said Bill, "and, besides, we can fish again."

Soon we had a blazing fire of driftwood and had our blankets spread to dry. There was more comfort here than we had had for days. The night before we had slept scarcely at all.

"Let's loaf the rest of to-day anyway," I suggested.

A breeze from the south freed us from mosquitoes. In a few moments we were all sound asleep. It was dusk when we woke up. Bill found a good fishing spot a little way along the shore and came back with a trout. As soon as it was eaten, we put up our shelter, and again we slept. Till now we had not confessed even to ourselves the full measure of our fatigue.

The next day was spent in making a raft of driftwood—pleasant and easy work after our toilsome marching. There was plenty of water to drink and fish to eat. When the last piece of wood was tied on, we stood back and looked at the rather ungainly craft on which our chances depended.

"All we need now," said Bill, "is a wind from the north."

After three days it came. At once we began to load the raft. We took enough cooked fish for half a dozen meals. The billy can with the fire in it was also taken, and a bundle of spare fuel wrapped in the tent.

"It's going to be beastly cold," said Alec, "if we

drift round all night on the lake. Let's take a hearth-stone."

Bill and I stared at him. He pointed to a flat stone on the shore. His idea, he explained, was to carry enough wood for a small fire on the stone during the night in the event of our not reaching land.

As soon as the hearth was placed in the middle of the raft our blanket sail was raised, and we began to move slowly southwards. We helped the wind by working with roughly made paddles.

All day we drifted south and south-east. To the south-west a hazy outline was visible, but ahead of us not a sign of land. The raft was a cranky affair, and our movements had to be few and careful. By the late afternoon we were intolerably cramped and stiff.

"Not much wind now," remarked Bill.

We were making scarcely a ripple. In half an hour the lake was glassy. It was only too clear that we were not to pass the night on land. As darkness fell the air grew cold. Alec kindled a little fire on the stone, round which we sat huddled up in blankets and hoping for a good wind in the morning.

It was a strange situation. The darkness and the cold mist made a close curtain around and over us. Our tiny fire was the only bright speck in a dreary world. From somewhere on the lake came occasionally the high-wailing cry and then the shrill mocking laughter of a loon. This was the only sign of life, and it was not one which cheered us. The water could not be seen, but every few minutes it gurgled beneath

us as our movements rocked the raft. Proper sleep was impossible.

At last the long wait was over and day broke. A fresh breeze blew in our faces; the mist began to roll away. We eagerly looked at the sun and then at the ripples made by the raft.

"We're going north," said Alec, in disgust.

Our pace was soon fairly brisk for a raft. We had been repulsed in our attempt to go south, and for a while we could think of nothing else. We sat in silence and looked at the ruffled water ahead of us over which we had slowly travelled yesterday. Breakfast—cold fish and water warmed over the embers of our night's fire—was a cheerless meal. Presently Bill threw off some of his gloom. He could never feel wholly miserable for long if there was fishing to be had. In the course of the morning he caught two good-sized trout.

"Land ahead," shouted Alec, at about three o'clock in the afternoon.

A faint bluish line was discernible. Very slowly it grew more distinct. After a while trees could be made out, then rocks on the shore.

"Well, at any rate we'll have a good sleep to-night," I said.

I was more discouraged than I cared to confess. What was the wisest thing to do now was not clear to me. Bill and Alec were all for trying the lake again with the next north wind.

In a few minutes we had landed. The first thing we did was to loosen our cramped muscles. We could scarcely move. When we were limbered up and had

had a hot meal we at once put up the tent and went to bed.

Next morning everything was right for our second attempt. A steady wind, directly from the north, was rolling the waves down the lake.

"Even a raft should be able to get there to-day," said Alec.

And so once more we turned our backs on the north. For six hours the wind and the raft did their best for us. We saw the northern shore gradually diminish, sink, and all but disappear. But to the south there was as yet no sign of land.

In the middle of the afternoon I thought I saw signs of the wind dropping, but said nothing to the others. When half an hour had passed there was no room for doubt.

"Stuck again," said Bill.

It turned out that all three of us had noticed that the wind was failing, and that each had been unwilling to disturb the others.

Another monotonous night with mist and water all around us. Chilled and stiff we sat through the weary hours.

Light came, but the mist was slow in moving. There was no wind to drive and scatter it. When it had gone at last we saw that the lake was polished steel. Not a ripple anywhere. We felt more helpless and alone than if we had been in the midst of a gale.

As soon as breakfast was over we took to the paddles. We made some progress, but the pace was pitifully slow. The paddles were heavy clumsy things, the

position was tiring, and the raft had not been built for speed. We had no idea of how distant the south shore was, and this ignorance wearied us more than anything else.

"I wonder if it's any use digging holes in the water this way," said Alec, after we had been at it for about an hour.

We had nothing to steer for—only the faint hazy shore line to the south-west. We had no means of judging our speed. The whole business was, we felt, hopeless. However, we paddled on till noon. By that time the heat was oppressive and the glare blinding. Our eyes ached and our heads were giddy. The raft seemed a speck on the immense gleaming plain. The sight of a single tiny island would have been a great relief. It would have broken the monotony of the view and have given us something to measure our progress by. But there was nothing except the dim line of shore behind and the dimmer line in front.

Bill suddenly stood up and began to strip.

"Why stew when there's cold water all around?" he said.

He took a header and came up spluttering and grinning.

Alec and I had soon followed him. There was no danger in us all leaving the raft. It would not run away. In a few minutes three fairly cheerful boys were sitting down to a meal of fish. The swim had greatly lightened our spirits.

For a while we paddled vigorously and persuaded ourselves that we were getting somewhere.

But in an hour we were once more hot and tired, and the south-west shore looked not a bit nearer. We could not resist the appeal of the cool water, but were content this time with a mere plunge.

The minutes crawled past. Still we paddled, but with no confidence or zest. Slowly the sun got lower, and far from dreading the night we looked forward to it eagerly. The hours of darkness would at least be cool.

"We won't want your hearth to-night, Alec," I said.

The distant shores faded from view; the water darkened in colour; the clouds took on pink and purple hues.

Alec pointed to them.

"Looks like a windy sky," he said.

"Well," said Bill, "anything would be better than that infernal calm."

Just after he had spoken, a little breeze from the south wrinkled the smooth water. Presently a second puff of wind came, then a third. In a short time there was a steady blow.

"All our paddling thrown away," said Alec as the raft began to move northwards.

The wind was strengthening every minute. The water was lapping and splashing up on the raft. Behind us here and there against the darkening lake gleamed a whitecap.

The sail was taken down. Our things were piled, as compactly as we could manage, in the centre of the raft. The balloon silk was placed on top. We had not

much hope of keeping the blankets dry, but it was worth trying.

A wave broke against the end of the raft, and there was a hissing sound.

"The billycan. The fire's gone," said Alec. "The water came in through the side holes."

Soon there was complete darkness. It was a starless night. The raft rocked and tossed so violently that we clung to each other. Waves and spray drenched us. An hour earlier we had been half sick with heat; now we were shivering.

We knew how long we had sailed southwards. On this basis we made a rough calculation as to when we might reach the north shore. Bill looked at his watch with a flashlight. We estimated that we might land in about two hours.

As time passed we listened anxiously for the sound of waves dashing on the shore. Alec, from time to time, thrust his staff into the water.

"One hour gone," announced Bill at last.

Another long wait, and then Alec called out:

"I struck bottom."

At the same instant we heard the sound of waves beating on land. What kind of a shore we were approaching we could not tell. The noise suggested a low beach at one time, and at another time cliffs. Bill's flashlight would not pierce the darkness far enough. Alec was still sounding with his staff.

"Only three feet now," he shouted.

Above the whistle of the wind we could hear the pound and crash of the breakers on the shore. It was

terrifying in the darkness. Could we carry our cargo to land?

All at once we grounded.

"Grab the stuff and wade ashore," I ordered.

We had everything in readiness. I slipped off into the water. The others followed, each with his bundle on his shoulder. As we staggered forward in the darkness, succeeding waves broke over our backs and we reeled beneath their force. Once I heard a faint smothered cry. Then someone bumped into me.

"All right," shouted Bill, "I'm up again."

The shore turned out to be not more than thirty paces distant. It was low and sandy. A few minutes after leaving the raft we had all arrived, cold, dripping, but safe.

CHAPTER IX

A Sign on a Tree

"Matches!" said Bill between chattering teeth, as he slipped off his rucksack and began to rummage among its contents. Soon the tobacco tin was found. Bill opened it and carefully felt our six remaining matches.

"They seem all right," he said. "Good old wax."

"Now for wood," said Alec.

A cold night wind blowing through your wet clothes is a strong incentive to find fuel, and it was not long before we had a fair-sized pile. Shavings were carefully prepared in a sheltered spot behind a rock. Alec and I knelt down to help shut out the wind. Alec held the flashlight. Bill took a match and struck it on a small stone. What was the cause I do not know—perhaps it was because Bill's hand was trembling with the cold—but anyway the top of the match broke off, flared, and went out.

"Sorry!" said Bill quietly. "Try your luck, Jim."

I took Bill's place. Determined not to break the match, I rubbed it very gently. Nothing happened. I rubbed again, and the white tip of the match came off.

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"If the third doesn't do the trick, we go without a fire," I said. "Come on, Alec."

He handed me the flash, and struck the match. The flame wavered, then burnt steadily. It kindled the shavings, and we were sure of our fire.

In ten minutes we were at least warm, if not dry. Our blankets were heavy with water, but, with a rock between us and the wind, we were well enough off. We knew that the heat would make us drowsy, but the fire must be kept going. I was stoker for the first hour; Alec followed, and then Bill. So between dozing and gathering wood we wore the night away.

When daylight came we looked over our things. Nothing seemed to be lost. We ate a fish and finished drying our blankets. We were all singularly quiet during the meal. The reason was not far to seek.

What was to be the next move?

Our venture south from the river to the lake, although not of great length, had been sufficiently difficult and tiresome to deter us from any attempt to walk round the lake and strike out for a distant settlement. Our boots were about gone, and, when they went, we should be almost helpless in that country where walking under any circumstances was none too easy.

The others, I was certain, felt as I did about another voyage on the lake.

The raft had been buffeted about by the wind, and helplessly becalmed. It was very evident that it would be by chance only that it would traverse the lake to

a point suitable for our purpose. We had had no better luck on the water than in the air.

We had been defeated, and there was nothing for it but a retreat. But we were resolved not to be stampeded. It was going to be an orderly fall back.

Slowly we packed up. Still no word of what we were going to do. I felt that Alec and Bill were waiting for me to give a lead.

"Back to the *Hamper* and downstream seems the only thing, now," I said. We had all realized that that was our best move. But we had shrunk from facing the hard facts. Now that it had been put into words we quietly accepted the inevitable.

When we had made up our packs, Alec instinctively put his hand to his belt. He looked at us with a troubled expression.

"The compass! Have you seen it?"

We searched all over, but with no success. It had probably slipped off when Alec had undressed on the raft for a bathe. At any rate it was gone. We should have to find our way north without its help.

"Well," said Bill, "If two scouts can't do that, I'll eat my shirt."

"Remember the mosquitoes, and don't be reckless," I warned him.

We were all ready to start when our second loss was discovered.

"What about carrying the fire?" asked Alec.

But the billy can with the holes in it had disappeared. In the darkness and confusion it had apparently been washed off the raft. The remaining billy was too

valuable to punch holes in, and yet, with only three matches left, we felt we must try to carry fire somehow.

"It may keep alive in the billy even without holes," said Alec.

The problem, of course, was to retrace our steps as accurately as we could. It seemed to us that we were west of the point where we had first struck the lake. Accordingly we started east along the shore. After about an hour Bill pointed ahead.

"I remember that queer-shaped boulder, I think," he said.

"Right you are," said Alec, as he reached the spot. "Here are chips we made when building the raft."

We turned to the left and headed in a northerly direction. The sun was warm on our backs. Soon we were on the ridge from which we had first seen the lake. In front of us rolled the rocky country over which a few days before we had painfully toiled.

We were ill equipped for the return journey. Our boots were cracked and torn. Rock, sun, and water had been too much for them. We had only three matches, a slim stock of food, and no compass.

Keeping the sun behind us and picking out a point to steer for on a ridge a quarter of a mile ahead, we filed slowly north.

The whole landscape looked alike; there was nothing to mark our former route. The gaunt cheerless land looked more desolate than ever. Our recent freedom from mosquitoes made them all the harder to endure now, and there was little temptation to rest long. They bothered us less when we were on the move.

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When we stopped at noon, the fire in the billy can was still smouldering. We cooked enough fish for two meals. All afternoon we pushed on, and at nightfall we were tired and footsore. To make matters worse, the fire had gone out, and we did not dare use one of our matches. To eat cold fish was no hardship, but the lack of a smudge meant a night of torment.

One result of our discomfort was an early start. This day was cloudy. The mosquitoes were merciless. Our feet ached, and we were all grim and silent as we trudged on.

There was more than one discussion as to whether we were on the right track. We had no sun to tell us where north lay. Bill and Alec were both confident that they knew, but unfortunately they were often in disagreement. For myself I had no convictions on the matter. It was disturbing to think that each step might be taking us farther away from our goal. Finally I was so confused by the conflicting opinions of the others that I suggested a halt until the sun came out again. Alec and Bill joined in rebellion. They were so sure of their ability as scouts to find the way that they overruled me. To tell the truth, I was loath to stop, for almost anything was better than the torment of the mosquitoes.

As the day was drawing to a close I insisted on a rest. We were discouraged and weary and with no fire to comfort us. Most disheartening of all was the feeling that perhaps we had not been going north at all.

About a quarter of a mile to our right I saw a hill. Perhaps from its summit I might be able to see some

feature of the landscape which we had noted on our journey south. As I started off, Alec and Bill were discussing which was north. The last thing I heard was a hint to Bill to get ready to eat his shirt.

The view from the hill was of no use after all. Slowly I came down again into the valley. It was clothed with thick grass and heavy moss. A lone stunted willow stood right in my path. I paused and looked listlessly at it for a moment. And then I noticed something. I shouted to the boys. They came on wearily.

"Have you settled the direction?" I asked.

"I have," said Bill, "but Alec doesn't agree with me."

"There's north," said Alec, and pointed.

"Wrong," I said. "Look at the moss at the foot of that willow."

"Good boy, Jim," said Alec. "I knew moss was always thicker on the north side, but we have seen so few trees lately I never thought of looking."

We went on till dark looking out for every little tree and shrub and steering our course by them.

A short but wearisome night brought a beautiful sunshiny day. We were soon on our way and now with more confidence. We shot a ptarmigan but had no means of cooking it. However, we carried it along.

Shortly after our noon rest, Bill gave an exclamation and made for a small boulder that lay just off our path. He held up the field-glasses. We were on the right road.

We knew that we were not far from the river now.

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As we were lying down resting at our next halt, Alec suddenly sat up and grabbed the glasses. He unscrewed a lens from one end, and, gathering a bunch of dried grass, he focused the rays of the sun on it. A little curl of smoke rose wavering, and soon we had our fire back again.

“ Well, what fools we are!” said Bill, “ the lens of the flash would have done that for us days ago.”

We pushed on a little farther that day. The certainty of striking the river close to our old camp kept us going. The next morning we had just started when a line of trees and bushes appeared in sight two or three miles ahead.

“ The river,” I said.

The rest was easy. We reached the river bank. We did not know whether we were east or west of the basket. We tried going upstream first. After twenty minutes' march we saw a familiar object ahead of us—the *Northern Hamper*.

CHAPTER X

The Open Tent-flap

One of the necessities for our journey downstream was a stock of food. It did not seem wise to depend wholly on fish, and, besides, we were longing for a change of diet.

"If only we could get a caribou," said Alec at breakfast the next morning.

"Let's rest to-day and try our luck to-morrow," I suggested.

"We might spend the time improving the tent," answered Alec. "Something a little more mosquito-proof wouldn't do any harm."

The amount of silk we could spare from round the basket was strictly limited, and we had no needle and thread. With a penknife and bits of fishing line we managed to make a small wedge tent just big enough for the three of us to squeeze into and with flaps to tie in front.

At the first streak of dawn we were ready for the hunt. After breakfast we carefully banked the fire. We took both rifle and shot-gun. The fringe of woods on the river bank was soon passed and we were once more in the open country we had come to know so

well in the last week. There was a slight drizzle, but it was rather pleasant than otherwise. We were cheered by a familiar sound.

“Listen, ole Sam Peabody-y-y-y jest as plain as plain,
Bless his heart a whitethroat singin’ in the rain.”

We put up several ptarmigan as we went along, but did not fire for fear of disturbing deer.

Our general direction was south-east. We were fully awake to the danger of getting lost in this vast featureless country once we left the river. As we went along, therefore, we raised some sort of landmark on each elevated spot, a substitute for blazing the trail.

We tramped until midday, sometimes over a soft carpet of moss and lichens sprinkled with wild flowers of many sorts, sometimes over bare rock. But there was no sign of big game. After a light and hasty meal we went on.

“Look, there’s something,” said Bill, pointing to the south. On a small rise perhaps half a mile away an animal was moving.

“It’s a deer,” said Alec, after using the field-glasses, and motioned us to crouch down.

A second and then a third deer came into view over a ridge, and dropped out of sight into a shallow valley beyond. Alec tossed a few blades of dry grass into the air. They blew over our heads.

“The wind’s right,” he whispered.

The deer were now in sight again. Apparently they had not noticed us. No doubt they were so seldom disturbed on these northern plains that they did not

have to be much on their guard. They were constantly on the move, now in one direction, now in another, sometimes in a circle. Their general movement was away from us and into the wind.

As we drew closer we noticed a clump of small willows between us and the deer. The bushes were low and straggling, but looked large enough to afford a little cover. Alec, of course, was to do the shooting.

"I believe," he said, "I could get a shot if I could crawl to there."

Bill and I stayed behind while he advanced cautiously. The sun was now shining brightly in our eyes, but we could make out that the deer were still moving—and quickly too. But, thanks to their circling motion, Alec was gaining on them.

He was still some distance from the willows when, to our surprise, we saw him stop and aim. Why on earth did he not try to get closer? And then, while he was aiming, the clump of willows rose and began to move. Alec shot once, twice, three times. What we had taken to be willows were the horns of caribou. At Alec's first shot one of them stumbled, but got up again. The second shot brought it to its knees. It was trying to rise again when the third shot settled the matter.

By this time the other deer were far away. There was no further need for concealment.

"We won't starve yet for a bit," said Bill, as he and I came up to Alec, who was standing, rather proudly, beside the dead deer.

When we came to skin the animal, two of us working

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with knives and one trying to keep off the clouds of mosquitoes, we found it pretty lean. On several places along the neck we noticed the pupa of some insect, which perhaps accounted for the lack of fat.

"Rather a scraggy old lady," I said to Alec. "But better than nothing."

"Lady?" said Alec indignantly. "It's a buck—my first."

"I'd like to see you telling that to a gamewarden. You would have paid a good price for shooting this old girl."

"Nonsense, Jim. Look at the horns. Did you ever see a doe with horns?"

"No, never before; but then I've never seen a caribou before. They all have horns—bucks and does both."

"Oh, well," said Alec, a little crestfallen, "it's not the horns we're going to eat."

None of us had ever cut up a deer. Certainly we made a sorry mess of it. Hands, face, and clothes were soon smeared with blood. The mosquitoes were everywhere. Overhead a few crows had appeared from nowhere in particular. They made it quite plain that they wished us to be gone. We worked with a furious haste but small skill. With great difficulty we separated the two hindquarters. That, we decided, would be plenty to carry. The crows could have the rest. The load was slung on Bill's staff, and we started back to camp. Our signposts enabled us to find our way without much trouble.

The fire was still smouldering, and we soon had some

caribou steaks in the pan. A bathe in the river removed our bloodstains and restored us to a measure of self-respect.

We were sitting down to our meal when Alec went to the tent for a sweater. When he came back I noticed an odd expression on his face.

"Bill," he said, "when you came back for your knife this morning did you fasten the tent flap?"

"I think so. Yes, I remember doing it."

"Well, I found it open."

"Oh, I can't have done it after all, but I was sure I had," said Bill.

"Try and remember," I interjected. Alec's face showed he was puzzled and worried. I guessed what was on his mind. We believed that we were hundreds of miles from any other human being, but were we?

"I am pretty sure I did," said Bill impatiently, "but, hang it all! I'm not certain, and anyway what's the difference?"

"Don't you see what I'm driving at?" asked Alec.

"No."

"Well, if you fastened the flap, then somebody was here while we were away and has left it open."

Bill's jaw dropped. He wore a look of blank amazement.

"Well—but—who?" he stammered.

"That remains to be seen."

We all got up and made a careful inspection of the tent, but, as far as we could see, nothing was missing. We came back to the fire, but in an uneasy mood. The open flap would not be forgotten. Since our land-

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ing on the island we had thought of little else but the many dangers confronting us, but the idea of danger from men had never crossed our minds.

At odd moments I saw Bill and Alec cast furtive glances into the shadows, when they thought they were unobserved. I did not blame them; I was guilty of it myself. Who had been in the tent? What had he wanted? Would he come again? Or, after all, had Bill left the flap open, and were we tormenting ourselves for nothing?

We pretended to each other that we were undisturbed, but the pretence convinced nobody. There were long silences broken only by lame attempts at cheerful talk. We had no difficulty in waking up to replenish the fire. The rifle and shot-gun were kept close at hand and loaded.

CHAPTER XI

In which I go Fishing and burn my Toe

Never was daylight more welcome than that which found us eagerly waiting for it in our camp at the foot of the rapids.

With the light came courage and common sense. By day we could at least see and measure danger if it should appear. We set about getting breakfast with something like cheerfulness. Our night fears seemed like a bad dream. An open tent-flap seemed a trivial thing. The mist rolled off the river, and with it went most of our fears. And yet—and yet, I could not help thinking, Bill had been very positive at first that he had tied the flap.

The morning and part of the afternoon we spent in trying to preserve our caribou meat in the Indian way, or in what we thought was the Indian way. Strips were cut and hung up in the sun; others were placed near the fire. Our aim was to cure the meat without cooking it.

Towards the end of the afternoon I left Bill and Alec watching the operations, and strolled down to

a promising fishing-place I had noticed where a small stream tumbled into the river, making a swift whirling eddy. My guess turned out to be correct. There were plenty of trout, and all eager to take my flies. I soon had as many as I could carry on a string.

As I sat down on the bank to put on my socks and boots, for I had been wading, I noticed a short distance up the creek a dark patch on the rock, high up behind boulders. It looked like the entrance to a cave. It would take only a moment to find out.

With some difficulty I scrambled up, and found that I was right. But the size of the cave I could not make out. All that could be seen by peering in was a fairly large open space and a second opening, leading from this chamber farther into the rock.

I stooped down and crept in, and then rose cautiously, holding my hands above my head. To my surprise, they touched nothing. One thing struck on my senses at once—a peculiar penetrating odour. I could not define it, but of one thing I was sure. It was not merely the ordinary damp smell one often finds in caves. I began to grope my way round the walls. Finally I came to the opening into the inner cave, but did not enter. My eyes were now more accustomed to the darkness. I could just make out that I was in a roughly circular room, some forty feet in circumference.

There seemed no reason for wasting more time in explorations. I moved towards the entrance. And, as I did so, I gave a shout of surprise and fear, and

scrambled on hands and knees out to the daylight. Something hot had burned my bare foot. I lifted it up. There was no doubt about it. The mark of the burn showed distinctly. My heart thumped in my chest. I looked hurriedly to right and left. Not a sign of a living creature; no noise except that of the falling stream. But I felt sure that Bill had tied the flap, and that we were not alone in the wild.

If I am not remarkably brave, I do not think I can fairly be called a coward. But I do not mind admitting that, as I stood outside the cave, I was filled with wild panic. Why I did not bolt headlong I do not know, but I remained there, trembling and waiting for something to happen.

Gradually a little self-control came back, and with it a feeling of shame. After all, a few hundred yards away Alec and Bill were sitting by the fire. I nerved myself to re-enter the cave. On hands and knees I felt my way forward. About the middle of the cave my hand struck something hot. I seized it and backed out. In my hand was a small hollowed stone, smelling strongly of oil—apparently a crude lamp.

I got back to camp somehow, stumbling and slithering over the boulders. As I ran I glanced behind me. I saw, or thought I saw, something leap behind a boulder.

When I got within a short distance of the camp I slowed down to a walk. The fire was burning brightly; Alec and Bill were sitting there, quiet and unconcerned. Were my fears absurd? I would not mention them for the present anyway.

But my resolution was no use. The first thing Bill said, as I came up, was:

"Well, where are your fish?"

"Did you lose the rod?" asked Alec.

"And what about your boots?" added Bill.

In my mad rush I had forgotten to snatch up my things. There was no use inventing excuses. Besides, I could not have invented a decent excuse at the moment. I told the boys as quietly as I could what had happened. They listened in excited silence. After I had finished, the little stone lamp was examined. None of us had ever seen anything like it before. There was no doubt that it was a lamp and that it had been alight shortly before I had found it. That was all we knew, but it was enough to disturb us.

Finally Alec said:

"What about retrieving the boots and the trout?"

We took the rifle along, but saw and heard nothing. When we were back at our fire, we fell to talking of what was best to do. Of course, we knew that all our anxiety might be needless, but if the man, whoever he was, was not hostile, why did he sneak and dodge about?

"The sooner we start downstream," said Bill, "the better. Let's push off in the morning."

Out of the darkness, heard above the noise of the rapids, came a call:

"Whoo! Whoo! Whoo!"

We were startled, but tried to laugh it off.

"Our nerves must be jumpy," said Alec. "It's only an owl."

From farther downstream came an answering call.

"Whoo! Whoo! Whoo!"

Then complete silence except for the noise of running water. I fancy the same thought occurred to us all at the same moment. Were the hoots signals? Were we going to be surrounded in the dark and pounced upon? I should like to be able to record that we remained calm and unperturbed, but as a matter of fact we were downright scared.

"Do you suppose they're Indians?" whispered Bill.

Bill's question relieved the tension. We told Bill that the old scalping days were over, that he was in a civilized country, and that he had been reading too much Fenimore Cooper. But at the back of our minds we felt none too sure that Bill was wrong.

For a moment we thought of loading up the basket and starting at once. The river seemed familiar and friendly compared to the land. A little reflection showed us the danger of this plan. Within a mile there might be a waterfall that would smash the basket and leave us to drown. In the darkness we could not prevent the silk from being torn by rocks. No, it would be folly to risk the river.

"Suppose we let the fire die down," suggested Alec. "Then we can't be seen."

As the fire sank to a mass of glowing embers we felt safer, though the night now seemed to rush in upon us. Then we quietly loaded our things into the basket, and stood on guard beside it with the rifle and shotgun.

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Not many days before we had been in the air, and the chief thing we had longed for was firm land. But now what would we not have given to rise in safety far above the dangers of earth? We felt countless eyes levelled at us from the encircling shadows.

Two hours passed, and we began to relax. Why weren't we comfortably asleep in the tent instead of staring into the darkness at nothing? Alec yawned.

"Whoo! Whoo! Whoo!"

And again the answering cry. The sound was much closer than before. No question of drowsiness now. We stood alert and tingling. And now even in the roar of the rapids we fancied we heard the shouts of men.

The summer nights are short in the north, but this one seemed endless. The dipper slowly revolved round the Pole Star. At last we saw the stars grow dim and gradually fade. A faint flush followed. The shadows lifted, and the day broke.

We were still safe. Had we been needlessly tormenting ourselves? Had we missed a night's rest merely to listen to owls? Sunshine seemed to pour ridicule on our fears.

"Look!" said Alec. "There goes one of your Indians, Bill."

Bill turned. A large white owl was flapping his way heavily downstream.

"Don't you think," said Bill, "that you may have been wrong about the man jumping behind the boulder?"

"Perhaps," I answered. "It may have been imagination, but the hot lamp was real enough."

CHAPTER XII

Bluequill

We were all hungry after our night of watching. The fire, which was by now almost cold, was not easily revived. Tiny scraps of dry bark and grass and hard blowing by three pairs of lungs brought smoke and at last flame. While we were all on our knees puffing and fanning there was a slight noise behind us. We turned to see a short thick man lifting the rifle out of the basket. He gave us one look and bolted along the shore. Of course we gave chase. Bill had the shot-gun; Alec and I were unarmed. But the thing was hopeless. Almost at once we had lost sight of him among the rocks and bushes. The rifle was loaded, and we were at the fellow's mercy.

We stopped dead after running a short distance and looked rather blankly at one another. Then Bill expressed what all of us were feeling when he said:

"Come on, let's get out of this place. We don't know how many of these fellows are round here."

Breakfast was forgotten. In ten minutes everything was stowed away in the basket. We lifted her gingerly into the water, took a last hasty look round to see that nothing had been left, and pushed off.

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"Did you get a good look at him, Alec?" asked Bill, as we drifted downstream.

"No. But I'm sure of one thing. He wasn't an Indian. He had flat blunt features, and he was the wrong colour."

"Well," said Bill, "he's got the rifle, but it won't do him much good. For we have the ammunition."

The current on which we were moving was not very rapid. The banks were, for the most part, low and strewn with pebbles and boulders. With our paddles we kept the *Hamper* in the swiftest part of the stream. The shores glided steadily past. It was the only comfortable travelling we had had since our crash on the island.

We decided that, unless stopped by falls or rapids, we would drift on till it was time to camp. A little meat left over from the evening meal staved off hunger. In the afternoon the river widened, and presently we found ourselves on the quiet waters of a small lake. There was not enough wind to sail with, and reluctantly we took up our clumsy paddles. Our blunt bow shoved rather than cut the water.

"After these rafts and baskets a canoe will feel good again when we get home," said Alec.

We crawled down the lake. Arms and backs were soon aching. If there was to be much of this we should never see the Bay.

"Let's camp there," I said, pointing to a small island a quarter of a mile ahead.

Nobody, I thought to myself with a sense of relief,

would be likely to bother us on an island. The experience of the morning had left me nervous.

When we landed our first thoughts were of food.

"Get the fire going, will you, Alec?" I said, "while Bill and I put the tent up."

"All right!" and then he paused. "But how?"

We had not thought of carrying fire with us. In our haste to get away that had been wholly forgotten. It was too cloudy to use the glass. The question was: could we afford one of our three matches?

"I'm for saving the matches and eating dried caribou," said Bill.

Alec and I agreed. Our lives might depend on the matches. It would be madness to use them before we had to. Bill and I went off to put up the tent, leaving Alec to make the simple preparations required for the meal.

When we returned he was busy with his knife. Beside him lay a stick about a foot long and as thick as his finger. One end was slightly pointed. There was also a flat piece of wood with a small notch in the side. In his hands was a bent stick.

"What are you playing at?" I asked.

"Oh, whittling," he answered.

He took off his Turk's Head—the knotted leather thong through which his Scout scarf passed. When it was straightened out he tied it to the ends of his bent stick. It looked like a crude bow.

Then I understood. It was a fire-bow. He twisted the bow string once round the slender stick, put the pointed end in the notch and then, kneeling, he began

to saw with the bow. The upright stick rotated rapidly. Bill and I were watching intently.

The stick suddenly jumped out of the notch, and Alec gave an impatient exclamation. Again he began, and again the spindle whirled. Smoke at last rose from the notch, first thin and then thick. With the utmost caution Alec removed the spindle and then the notched wood. There was left a tiny pile of the finest sawdust. Throwing himself flat on the ground Alec blew the sawdust into a red glow. Carefully he added little shreds of dried bark and grass. Finally a small tongue of flame flapped and wavered.

"That's got it," and Alec leaned back with a look of satisfaction on his face.

After supper we concealed the basket as best we could under an overhanging tree. It was not at all likely that we had been followed, but there was no advantage in advertising our presence on the island.

That night our sleep was long and dreamless. We had not closed our eyes the night before, and now we made up our arrears. Not till the sun had made the tent intolerably hot did any of us stir. After a dip in the lake and a breakfast of trout we no longer thought grimly about the long journey ahead of us. We almost felt that we were on a holiday canoe trip—though, to be sure, the *Northern Hamper* was not much of a canoe.

We had soon reached the end of the lake, and once more we moved slowly but steadily downstream between winding banks. The trees seemed to be only along the shore, and, even here, in places none were

to be seen. We passed the hours in steering, paddling, and fishing.

Towards four o'clock we landed to camp. As we had carried fire with us, it was not long before we had a fish in the pan. I was cook, as it happened, Alec and Bill were arranging the tent. Just as I was about to call them to the meal, one of them gave a shout of warning. I was squatting over the fire. I half-turned, and, as I did so, I heard a rush behind me. I was jostled aside, and a brown hand snatched the fish out of the pan.

CHAPTER XIII

The Cree Boy's Story

It was an Indian boy. I had never seen anybody so thin and wasted. His cheeks were hollow, and his eyes, deep sunk, had a wild desperate look. He crammed handfuls of fish into his mouth with incredible fierceness and haste. The bones did not seem to trouble him. He swallowed everything with eager noisy gulps. In a few moments only the back bone was left, and from that he stripped every tiniest shred of flesh. He paused a moment, and then his eye caught some smoked caribou meat lying near the fire.

"Hungry—eat," he said, pointing a lean forefinger. I handed him a piece, which followed the fish with amazing swiftness. He tore the meat almost as a dog does. At last this furious meal was over, and the boy slumped down upon the ground. In a few minutes he was asleep. *

Who was he? Where had he come from? Why was he alone? To all these questions we longed for an answer. But for the moment we could only wait and stare at our strange guest. Certainly there was no cause for alarm. We were three to one, and he was half-starved. As we watched him he began to toss and

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groan. His gluttony was showing its effects. Presently he woke up and clutched his stomach in distress. He rolled on the ground in agony. At the same time he uttered words in some language unknown to us. The meaning, however, was as plain as if he had spoken English.

We did not know very well how to relieve him. We made him drink hot water and put a warm towel on his stomach. For the rest we were forced to stand by and see him suffer. Through the night we took turns in watching him. As I tended the fire and kept on eye on our patient, I wondered if his presence would complicate our situation. Would we have to take him along? If he were as helpless as he seemed, we could not desert him. Then it flashed upon me that perhaps we had found, not an encumbrance, but a guide. This boy might know the water route to the Bay well, and, if we had to leave the river, his woodcraft ought to save us from countless dangers and mistakes. In the meantime we were impatient to learn his story.

Through most of the night he was restless, but became quieter towards morning. Finally he fell into an unbroken sleep. About six o'clock he sat up and stared at us.

"How do you feel?" asked Bill. "Still hungry?"

The boy looked at Bill solemnly for about half a minute. Then a grin came over his face. He pointed to his mouth, and tenderly patted his stomach. A few minutes later, when the breakfast fire was well started, he showed an eager interest in the preparations for the meal.

"That fellow," whispered Alec to me, "must have been without food for a long time. If I'd had a night like the one he had my appetite wouldn't be worth talking about."

During the course of the meal he was silent, except for his munching. Soon afterwards we had packed up. We had decided that the best thing to do was to continue our journey and take him with us. For the moment the poor fellow thought we were going to leave him. When we motioned him to join us and pointed to the basket, his face lighted up.

"Me go?"

"You bet," said Bill.

But, before he embarked, he surveyed the *Northern Hamper* with surprise and with childlike curiosity. He felt the wickerwork and the silk; he stared inside; he looked critically at her lines.

"I don't blame you," said Alec. "It's a mighty queer canoe."

"Canoe?" he said, and grinned.

However, he showed no reluctance about getting in, and soon we were once more drifting along. Now at last was our chance to start questions. To begin with, we asked his name.

"Bluequill," he answered.

We found out also that he was a Cree. The tale of his adventures took a long time to obtain—most of the day, in fact. He did not always understand our questions, and we were often puzzled by his answers. Gradually, however, we pieced the story together.

He and his father had been travelling with a party

of white men. They had started from somewhere in Saskatchewan, and their goal was the Coppermine River and Fort Confidence.

"Who were the men?" asked Bill. "Are they near here? What were they doing?"

Bluequill was bewildered by the string of questions.

"Men near here?" I asked him.

He shook his head.

"No, no, much far," and he waved his hand to the north.

"What were they?" I went on.

"Long see," he replied.

"What on earth does he mean?" said Alec.

None of us had the least notion. Nor were we much enlightened when the boy put one half-closed fist up to his eye and repeated:

"Long see."

"He seems to mean a telescope," said Bill.

"Yes, but what would anyone be doing with a telescope up here?" asked Alec.

"Ask him," said Bill.

Bluequill saw our blank expressions.

"Long see—t'ree legs," he said.

"For a while this did not help us much. It sounded like a riddle.

"I know what he means," said Alec. "A transit. He was with surveyors."

The party, we gathered, had reached a point on a river north and east of where we were at the moment. Caribou had been seen, and a halt had been called to secure meat. It was too good a chance to miss. The

white men had chafed at the delay, but Bluequill's father, Jumping Deer, had insisted. After enough meat had been secured and dried, the party was about to move on, when one of the surveyors discovered he had left his knife beside a carcass he had cut up. Bluequill had been sent to get it.

"Jumping Deer him say me, 'you go get him, Bluequill!'"

The distance from camp was considerable, but Bluequill was a good runner. Before he reached the place, however, several Eskimos closed in behind him. He knew they would attack him.

"Why?" I asked.

With a good deal of difficulty we learned that the Indians and Eskimos were traditional enemies. Neither ventured near the hunting-ground of the other unless in large parties and well armed. Bluequill was alone and without a gun. He trusted to his speed. After spending the night in a hiding-place he ventured out in the morning, only to find that the Eskimos were still on his track.

He had headed south and had at last shaken off his pursuers. But it was too late. He knew that the surveyors would by this time have given him up for lost. He decided to continue his journey south. He would ultimately reach wooded country, and there he would somehow be able to keep himself alive. But by the time he had reached our river he was nearly famished. He had seen us in our strange craft, and had followed along the bank. Weakened as he was by hunger, it was all he could do to keep up

with us. He had shouted, but we were too far ahead to hear. He had almost lost hope when he saw the basket turn in to the bank. He had come on our camp just when I was starting to cook. Hidden in the bushes he had watched me until hunger proved too much for him. It was then that he had rushed out and snatched the fish.

His gratitude was plainly shown in every look and act. We did not suspect how soon the debt was to be more than repaid.

CHAPTER XIV

Sounds at Night

We camped that night on a small wooded island. The shadows of evening were lengthening as we tied the basket securely to an overhanging tree. Across the quiet water came the "plunk-a-plunk" of a bittern. Against the fading crimson in the west, duck could be seen wheeling and circling; others whistled over our heads and splashed into the water.

Supper over and the tent up, we lay by the fire and talked to Bluequill, interested in a companion so different from ourselves. We were content also as we thought that we had left behind us that day a good stretch of river. Things were going well.

The air grew chilly as the fire burnt low. Seen through the smoke the stars sparkled and danced. The call of a loon rose and died away somewhere far off in the darkness. A shiver ran down my back.

"Cold, isn't it?" I said.

"What about getting into our blankets?" said Alec.

We all jumped up. The tent might have held four at a pinch, but Bluequill insisted upon sleeping in the open by the fire. We gave him what blankets we could spare. Soon all was quietness.

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As I lay half-dozing near the tent door, I watched the embers and flames of the fire. The smell of wood smoke was sharp and pleasant in my nostrils. A night bird passed from time to time and dropped down its plaintive cry. Bill and Alec had fallen asleep almost at once. Their deep full breathing sounded loud in the little tent. I was tired enough, but could not wholly shake off wakefulness. At last, however, I had all but succeeded, and drowsiness was stealing over me. Then the sudden scolding of a drake out on the water drove sleep away again. I lay and stared out of the tent door with all of my senses horribly alert.

Between me and the fire lay Bluequill. The outlines of his body showed clearly as the flames flickered up. How long would the four of us be together? For weeks, perhaps for months, dependent in countless ways upon one another. Yet, after all, what did we know about him? Really nothing. Not that I distrusted him, but I could not help wondering how reliable he would prove in a tight corner.

My rambling thoughts were interrupted by a particularly obstinate mosquito. I waited for him to light. Three times the humming stopped, and three times I struck and missed. Sleep seemed farther away than ever. I tried lying on my left side, but that did not work. A moment later I turned back.

All at once I noticed that there was nobody between me and the fire. Bluequill had gone. Why should he be wandering about? All my vague uneasiness about him came back. But till I had something definite to tell Alec and Bill I was unwilling to wake them. To

wait and watch seemed the wisest thing. But I could see scarcely ten feet in the darkness. At one moment I thought I detected forms moving beyond the fire, but no sound came. It was nothing but the wavering in the air caused by the heat.

I was beginning to scold myself for having jumpy nerves, when into the circle of dim light cast by the dying fire crawled a man. He was moving towards the tent with extraordinary quietness. Of course it was Bluequill. But why was he creeping upon us in this way?

Propped on my elbow, I lay and watched him. Not a twig cracked under his hands or knees. Alec and Bill did not stir. My hand instinctively reached for the knife in Bill's belt. I was ready, should Bluequill attempt treachery. And yet why should he? What had he to gain? Indeed, had he not everything to lose?

As he reached the tent, he rose to his knees. Every muscle in my body was tense. My hand tightened on the knife handle. I could hear my heart hammering on my ribs. He stretched out his arm. His hand was empty, and, as he touched me, I felt suddenly ashamed of my suspicions.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"Man come," he said.

"Where?" I asked.

"Man come—water," he replied.

I listened, but could hear nothing. He signed to me to follow him. I felt weak all over, now that the suspense was past.

Getting up quietly so as not to disturb the boys, I slid after him into the chill night air.

"Paddle," he whispered, and pointed out into the darkness.

I listened and heard the faint sound of the swirling water as it leaves the paddle, and then the chug of the next stroke. I could not have distinguished it from many other water sounds; but when Bluequill drew my attention to it I recognized it at once.

In a moment we had wakened Alec and Bill. They sat up, rubbed their eyes, and at first looked dazed. We held a whispered conference. While we talked Bluequill was watching and listening a few feet from the tent.

"Well," said Alec, "friends don't usually call in the middle of the night. Of course he may not be coming here, but it's a queer time to be out paddling."

"I suppose," said Bill, "it's the fellow who stole the rifle."

"Yes, but why should he follow us?"

Then the reason flashed on me. What use was the rifle without ammunition? He had the six cartridges which were in the rifle when he stole it; now he had come for the rest.

"You didn't take the ammunition out of the basket, did you?" I asked Bill.

"No," said Bill. "Why?"

"That's what the beggar's after. An empty rifle's no good to him."

Bluequill appeared at the door.

"Man come near now," he announced quietly.

But his ears were sharper than ours. Only occasionally even now could we hear the sound of the paddle. Obviously, as the man approached, he was becoming more cautious.

Our plan was to divide into pairs. Each couple was to take up its station near the basket. If possible we would take the man prisoner and find out who he was. We also hoped to recover our rifle. Bill and I went to one side of the basket, Alec and Bluequill to the other. Alec had the shot-gun, but he was not to use it unless our lives were in danger. There was no difficulty in hiding. There was only starlight, and we were in the deep shadow of the trees.

Scarcely had we taken up our positions when it occurred to me that there might be several men in the canoe. The fact that we had seen only one man when the rifle was taken proved nothing. For an instant fear seized me. Then the stars in the water began to dance, and a dark shadow drifted into view. It was headed for the shore right at our feet. There was only one man.

The canoe touched the shore with a faint grating sound. A burly form stepped out and quickly pulled the canoe up. Before he could do more than turn round I was on him.

I tried to hold his bulky squat body, but he was too powerful. As he slipped from me Bill grappled with him. Just as I was trying to get another hold a light shone on the swaying figures. Alec was using the flashlight. For an instant the man was disconcerted. He stared in astonishment at the light. The pause in

the struggle was only momentary, but it was long enough for us to see the man's face. It was broad and flat, and the right cheek was marked by an angular scar.

I closed again with him. A knife gleamed and came flashing down. Bill dodged just in time to save his face, but the blade sank through his sleeve. Bill dropped to the ground. The man turned his attention to me. Again the knife rose, but before it fell Bluequill had seized the raised arm. The knife flew into the air, and I heard it drop into the water. With a growl the man seized Bluequill by the throat. Then there was a thud, and the man sank down. Alec had tapped him on the head with the stock of the shotgun. The fight was over.

It did not take long to truss the fellow up. He was still unconscious. Bill was lying on the ground, his sleeve soaked with blood.

"Only a flesh wound," said Alec, after a brief inspection. "We'll put on a rope tourniquet."

We carried him up to the tent and made him comfortable. The fire was replenished, and our prisoner, now conscious but scowling and silent, was hauled into its light.

He was ugly enough. Short hair, blunt, coarse features, a sulky expression, and a large stomach were the things we chiefly noticed. He would not speak.

"Eskimo," said Bluequill, with a look of triumph and hatred. We took no chances with the fellow, and mounted guard in turn for the rest of the night.

When morning came we had to decide what we were

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to do with him. Bill was well enough to travel, and we did not wish to lose time. First we searched for the rifle. There was no sign of it anywhere. As to the man, we first thought of destroying his boat and leaving him on the island. This, however, might have meant death to him, and we accordingly gave up the idea. Bluequill, naturally enough, did not feel that this possibility was any objection to the plan. Scarface, as Bill christened him, was an Eskimo; that was enough for Bluequill.

Alec finally suggested a plan which provided for our safety without endangering the Eskimo's life. We filled the canoe, or more properly the kayak, with small stones. It was a light craft, about ten feet long, and made of deerskin drawn over wooden ribs. It would, we calculated, take him some time to pick out the stones, and the kayak was not strong enough to stand tilting up with a weight in it. Then we took Scarface, tied his feet tightly together, and sat him down with his back to a large boulder. His hands were tied, and we bound him to the rock. When we were ready to start, a fire was kindled behind the boulder and we pushed off.

As we drifted away from the shore we watched him struggle. He jerked savagely at his bonds. But the knots held. He would remain a prisoner till the fire released him.

Presently a turn of the river hid him from us.

"I hope that's the last we see of him," said Bill.

Bluequill was rather sulky. He no doubt thought we had been foolishly tenderhearted.

CHAPTER XV

In which we avoid a Portage

"Come on! Tumble out! All aboard for the Bay."

It was Alec getting us out of our blankets at an unearthly hour. We looked out of the tent-door. He and Bluequill were crouched over a small fire. It was still semi-darkness. A cold white mist hid the river. Overhead we heard the cry of wild geese. Very sleepy and unheroic we came out into the chill morning air.

"Breakfast will be ready as soon as you've had your dip," went on Alec.

The suggestion was brutal, but Bill was already stripping. I was shamed into following his lead. The water was icy cold, and we rushed out, gasping and rosy, to the fire. But it was worth while. Our small tent became stuffy at night, and it needed the tonic of the cold bath to waken us up for the day's work. To Bluequill, of course, this was all foolishness. In his eyes cleanness was a quite unnecessary discomfort. He grinned at our shivering.

"Why you wash?" he asked.

We did not try to explain. By the time breakfast

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was over the mist was rolling off the river. We were soon slipping steadily downstream.

It was a lucky morning. We had gone barely a mile when we managed to shoot three duck. A fourth we wounded but lost. The presence of Bluequill was a continuous encouragement. Surely with his help we could come through safely. Compared with us he was skilled in northern travel, even if he had never risked his life before in a balloon basket. We were all in high spirits. Nobody minded the discomfort of four instead of three pairs of legs in our limited space. Bill hoisted his scarf on his staff for a flag. We were making good speed, and whenever the *Northern Hamper* tried to drift into quieter water we shoved and paddled her out again into the full current. We took special care to fend her off rocks. A rip in the silk would mean disaster, or at the best serious delay. And time was precious. Always at the back of our minds was the ugly thought that the winter might catch us. I for one knew that the summer season was very short in the north country. Besides, we were none too sure where we were heading for. If we got caught by winter, the game was up.

So the morning passed and the afternoon. The miles slipped astern. We went on as long as good daylight lasted. At dusk we landed at a high open spot. Our legs were cramped and aching. We wished we had a map on which to prick off our day's journey. We had, of course, asked Bluequill about the river, but he knew nothing of where it went to, or of how far we were from the Bay.

The night was bitterly cold—too cold even for mosquitoes. When we were dressing next morning, a flurry of snow startled us. It did not last long.

“I was just wondering,” said Alec as he shoved off, “if that snowstorm was the end of last winter or the beginning of next.”

It showed us the uncertainty of the weather on the Barrens. Instinctively we speeded up our paddling with nervous haste.

And yet we had not gone far before we met with vexatious but unavoidable delay. The banks drew closer together and began to slide swiftly by. Our one experience with rapids had given us no appetite for more. With some trouble we coaxed and pushed the *Northern Hamper* into the right bank and climbed out. Alec and Bluequill pushed on ahead to see what the river was like. Their going was slow over rocks and through underbrush. It was a couple of hours before they returned.

“Falls two miles ahead,” reported Alec. “Thirty feet high. But we can land a quarter of a mile this side of them and portage.”

The plan seemed the only feasible one. To portage the basket two miles through bush and over rocks would take more time than we could spare. Nevertheless we felt none too happy as we climbed in again and surrendered ourselves to the rushing current. Steering was almost impossible, but we kept as close to the right bank as we could and dared. Alec and Bluequill watched for the landing-place. They had marked it with a pile of stones. I suppose we were

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not travelling more than six miles an hour, but the shores seemed to tear past. Twice we just missed jagged rocks which would have torn our silk to ribbons.

"There are the stones," shouted Alec, pointing ahead. We all used the paddles with desperate energy, and slowly edged over to the shore. It was a toss-up whether we should be swept past or not. Alec grabbed the end of a rope, tossed us the other end, and stood ready to leap. We were now almost opposite the landing-place, but were still about five feet out from shore.

Alec balanced himself and jumped. He lit and sprawled on a boulder, but a moment later he had a clove-hitch round a tree. Slowly but steadily we pulled ourselves in.

So far so good. We began to lift the basket.

"This is going to be a brute of a portage," said Alec.

"Why not unload her and then let her down on a rope to the edge of the falls?" suggested Bill.

The bank was rather high in places, but a gravelly strip by the water's edge gave good footing. We went along it to have a look at the falls. Almost at the very brink was a gradually shelving rock where, with any luck, we could bring the basket ashore. There we could take the logs off to lighten her for the portage. After some hesitation we agreed to try Bill's plan. If it succeeded, it would save time, and in our eyes time was becoming increasingly valuable.

"If you carry the stuff round," I said to Bill and Bluequill, "Alec and I will lower the basket."

I took first turn at the rope, but soon needed Alec's help. The basket tugged, and we followed. The stream was now in its final rush towards the falls. The water had a deceiving and treacherous smoothness.

"Now for pulling in," I said to Alec.

We halted, and the moment we did so the tug doubled. We were nearly jerked off our feet. We dug our heels into the gravel and shouted to the others. But they were on higher ground and could not reach us for a minute. And a minute, as it turned out, was too long. We slipped and slipped. Reluctantly but steadily we went forward. Now the basket was on the verge of the falls. We made a final attempt at a stand. Swiftly we looked around for something to anchor the rope to. Not a thing within reach. It was a bitter moment, but we had to let go.

The *Northern Hamper* plunged over the falls, with her scarf-flag flying gallantly. Bill and Bluequill arrived panting a second too late.

We rushed as fast as we could over the rocks to a spot below the falls. For a time we could see nothing, the basket had clean vanished. There was a straight drop of about thirty feet and then a wild welter of foaming water.

As we gazed a log shot into sight, then another, and at last the basket slowly appeared, lying low in the water. She floated downstream, past the place where we stood. Alec and Bill immediately rushed along the shore after her. I did not know what was in their minds, but they were making excited gestures.

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A couple of hundred yards downstream a point jutted out, and the current did not appear to be so rapid. When they got there Bill sat down and took off his boots and coat. As the basket came opposite to him he plunged in and swam for her. I ran for the point so as to be on hand if needed.

It was not clear to me how Bill was to get the basket ashore. There were no paddles, and anyway she was full of water.

He soon reached the basket, and stood up on one of the side logs. Slowly the basket tilted over, and Bill dropped off again. As he swam towards shore the current carried him downstream. Alec followed down; and I arrived just as Bill, exhausted by the cold water, clambered out. In his hand was the tow rope.

Alec and I ran back with it and took a couple of turns round a large boulder. The basket swung in to the shore.

To empty her was the next thing, and a slow job it proved. When we had brought our things over the portage we used the frying-pan and billy for bailing.

There seemed to be little or no damage. After all, there had been less trouble than if we had taken the logs off and carried the basket over the portage. But we had come within an ace of losing our chance of reaching the Bay.

While the bailing was going on Bill was wringing out his clothes and spreading them in the sun. We did not wait for the operation to be finished. It could be done while we were on the move. Once more we launched the basket, and, while Bill sat huddled up

in a blanket, his clothes fluttered from the mast-head.

A mile or so below the falls the river widened, and soon we glided out on to another and broader stream. The current was slower and the banks less high. We sailed on till nearly sunset. For supper we roasted one of the ducks which we had shot in the morning.

At dawn we were again on our way. What time it was I do not know. I should have mentioned before that Bill's watch had been smashed when the balloon came down. Alec did not have one; and now mine, which had withstood many trials and jolts, refused to give out a single tick.

During the day the river, fed by smaller streams, gradually broadened. This gave us a feeling of progress, and we began to talk of what we should do when we reached the Bay.

About four o'clock, judging by the sun, we were leaving a small lake by what appeared to be one of several channels. We gained way rapidly. We heard sounds ahead, but could see nothing because of a turn in the river. Were we to be again plunged into rapids? We were gazing eagerly forward as we came round the curve. What we saw amazed us.

CHAPTER XVI

We study a Modern Language

A couple of hundred yards ahead of us was a scene of wild and strange confusion. From bank to bank the water was full of caribou. They were swimming this way and that in bewildered haste, churning up the water, tossing their antlers, and uttering a curious grunting sound. There must have been nearly two hundred of the creatures. They were being pursued by men in kayaks, who were obviously anxious to keep the beasts from landing. The kayaks, we could not help noticing, were handled with extraordinary skill. Small groups of caribou were being cut off and speared to death. Here and there the water was stained with blood.

All this we saw as we drifted into the turmoil. But we saw also another thing. The men were Eskimos, and the only Eskimo we had had dealings with had been none too pleasant. Were we now among a crowd of enemies? Bluequill plainly showed uneasiness, and looked as if he would have liked to cower down in the basket.

By now we were surrounded by kayaks and caribou. The Eskimos when they caught sight of us had stopped

spearing. Some of them made for the shore as if afraid. Others sat motionless, staring at us with blank amazement, as well they might. Three white boys in a grotesque boat with a strange flag, a shirt, and a pair of shorts flying at the masthead, were not an everyday sight. They were at least as surprised as we were.

With an instinctive desire to show our friendliness I grabbed the shot-gun and fired at the nearest caribou. The Eskimos were evidently reassured by this action; they began their killing again, and left the riddle of our sudden appearance to be solved later. At any rate this behaviour on their part did not look threatening. Through the strange scene of slaughter we drifted on. Dead animals and those in their last struggles were on all sides of us.

"For heaven's sake," said Bill, "hand me my things off the mast. I'm a modest lad, and probably some of these people are women."

Bill had just made himself safe and respectable in shorts and shirt when it became evident that the hunting was over. Some caribou had already escaped to shore; others were now being allowed to do so. Apparently the needs of the Eskimos were provided for.

While most of the paddlers were busied in drawing the carcasses to land, two of the kayaks slowly approached us. As they drew near the men laid down their spears, evidently as a token of friendliness. I, of course, put away the shot-gun. They had their eyes on Bluequill, and their looks, I thought, showed distrust. Bluequill said nothing to us, but stared with an expressionless face at the kayaks, which were now almost alongside.

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"Whatever happens, we stick to Bluequill," whispered Alec.

"Well, rather!" I answered. "Where would we have been the other night but for him?"

The Eskimos put their hands on the basket edge, fingering the wickerwork and silk with staring wonder. They made signs for us to go ashore. We began paddling towards the bank, and, as we went, our escort grew. More and more kayaks came up. We were surrounded by a crowd of broad flat-featured faces. From everywhere eyes were turned on us. A constant jabbering was going on of which we, of course, could not understand a word.

"Do you know the language?" I asked Bluequill. He shook his head.

"We're going to have a nice job talking to these lads," said Alec. "I never was good at languages at school."

"Well," said Bill, "high school French wouldn't help you much here anyway."

As we approached the land we could not help wondering what was in store for us. Presently the basket touched the bank. We jumped out and tethered her.

"Stick together," I whispered, "till we see how things go."

I took up my position on one side of Bluequill; Alec and Bill were on the other. On the whole it seemed to me prudent to leave the shot-gun in the basket and to appear utterly friendly and unalarmed.

We had, as it turned out, chosen the part of wisdom.



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ALEC BALANCED HIMSELF AND JUMPED

About two dozen men, women, and children pressed about us, but all wore friendly and smiling faces. The youngsters were squeezing in among their elders' legs, full of curiosity and eager to touch even our clothes.

"Here, sonny," said Alec, picking up a roly-poly about two years old. "You'll be getting squashed."

His act was taken as a sign of goodwill, and everybody laughed. The only thing which at all troubled us was the uncertainty with which Bluequill was regarded. If he noticed this, like a true Indian, he gave no sign either by look or action. His expression of concern when he had first seen the Eskimos was the only betrayal I ever saw in him of alarm when in the presence of danger.

By this time we and the crowd around us, which was growing every minute, had gained the top of the bank. In front of us was the camp. There were a score of deerskin lodges. Half-made sleds were lying around, and what I supposed to be the frames of kayaks ready to be covered with skins.

All at once we were nearly knocked over. A crowd of husky dogs had rushed upon us with bristling necks and sharp barks. Just in time our new-found friends drove them off with fierce cries. Growling and snarling, they retired.

One man, who looked middle-aged and appeared to be the leader, came forward and gave some orders. A group of men and older boys left off staring, launched their kayaks, and went to help the spearsmen bring the game ashore. Then the leader turned to us and

motioned us to sit down by making two or three movements with his open hand towards the ground.

"The old boy must be a scout," said Alec to Bill. "He knows the signals."

When we were seated the Eskimos squatted round us, still jabbering and staring. In the background preparations for a meal were going forward, and the smell of cooking reminded us that we were hungry.

In a few minutes a man came from the fire, apparently to announce that the meal was ready. We were given places beside the leader.

"I wish," said Bill, as he finished his last mouthful of caribou meat, "that we could get away quietly together to talk over things."

But we were much too interesting to our hosts for that to be possible until nightfall. And bedtime brought new embarrassments. We were courteously led to one of the deerskin lodges. Through the entrance we could see that it was already densely populated with children, but it was clear that several men and women were to sleep there also, besides ourselves. We looked at each other with some misgivings.

"Rather too cosy and intimate for me," said Alec.

Politely but firmly we shook our heads. We patted the ground under the trees and lay down there. The Eskimos looked grieved and surprised, but to our great relief seemed ready to give in to our foolish preference for fresh air.

In a few moments all was quiet except for occasional snores. We put some green stuff on the embers of the cooking fire to discourage mosquitoes and drive away

the husky dogs who were suspiciously nosing about. And then we discussed the situation.

"What are Eskimos doing here anyway?" I asked. "I thought the Arctic coast was their beat. Unless we're all out in our reckonings we're on the Hudson Bay watershed here."

Nobody had any light to throw on this question. The main problem was: what were we to do?

"I'm all for staying where we are for a while," said Bill. "These fellows seem friendly enough; in fact, a bit too friendly in their sleeping arrangements. If we insist on leaving them they may resent it. Let's wait and see."

Of course this meant loss of valuable time. Yet we might find out from the Eskimos where we were. They might, too, take us to some point whence we might reach a trading-post. As long as we were with them and kept their goodwill we were safe. Our stay might give us a chance to get more clothes. Our present wardrobe was certainly becoming woefully ragged.

"We won't be able to find out much from them as to where we are until we learn their blessed lingo," said Alec. "But it can't be much worse than German grammar."

As we turned over to sleep we somehow felt relieved that we were once more with other human beings. If they were not exactly civilized they were at least friendly. Our safety no longer depended entirely on our own efforts.

After a few days we felt more or less at home in

the camp. Our progress in the language was slow, though we soon learned some of the more necessary words. But it was one thing to be able to talk about spears and fires and caribou, and quite another thing to be able to ask where we were, where the river went to, and how far we were from Hudson Bay.

Their main work during these days was cutting up the deer meat and curing it in the sun. Indeed, it was for hunting that they had come south from the Arctic. We helped where we could, and often our clumsiness caused grins. One thing surprised us. The people were very shabbily dressed in old caribou skins, and yet the camp was littered with new hides. Why they did not use these we did not understand till much later. It took several days before we could distinguish the men from the women with certainty. The voices were our chief test.

The pleasant thing about our life in the camp was the friendliness of the man whom we had recognized as the leader at our first landing. He was apparently about thirty-five years of age. His name was Nilgar. He seemed to like us near him. When the meat-curing was going on it was he whom we helped. We ate with him, and it was he who helped us make a deer-skin lodge of our own. It was he also who took us out in his kayak and taught us the handling of that cranky craft—an art we never wholly mastered. And, best of all, it was he who saw to it that Bluequill was not molested.

Interesting though this life was, it was getting us no nearer the Bay and home. This fact worried us, and

yet what could we do? It seemed folly to throw away the safety which a happy accident had given us. If we could only find out how far off the Bay was and what the intervening country was like, we could better measure the dangers and chances of the journey. But this was not easy to do. The days slipped by and still we could get no exact information from the Eskimos. We made signs and we drew maps, but even Nilgar, who seemed the most intelligent, did not understand clearly what we meant.

Two things, however, we did discover. One was that the river—the Ark-i-linik they called it—did empty into the Bay. The other was that a little east of where we were the country became fairly well wooded. That meant game of various sorts. Heartened by these two bits of information we decided to continue our journey. We could take a supply of dried caribou meat and supplement it with fish and game. We now had warm deerskin clothing, though made of old hides, for nothing would induce the Eskimos to give us new skins.

Our decision to take to the river once more was reached late one night after much talk.

“So it’s all aboard in two days, is it?” said Alec, as he snuggled down into his blankets.

“And home in time for the first football match,” added Bill.

I had agreed with the decision, though with some misgivings. Bluequill had said nothing. The chances of success seemed fair. We knew certainly now that we were on the right track.

The next afternoon when I was trying to find the best way to pack our new bulky sleeping-bags into the basket, Nilgar came running towards me. He was making signs that something was wrong with one of the boys.

"Which one?" I asked anxiously.

For answer Nilgar pulled as long a face as his rotund features would allow.

"Bluequill?" I asked, and he nodded.

I followed Nilgar and found Bill and Alec giving first aid. It turned out that Bluequill had fallen from a tree and broken the large bone in his left leg below the knee. We improvised splints and made our patient comfortable. Soon afterwards we carried him to our tent. We sat down to think over our plight.

"Just our rotten luck," said Bill, "we would have been off to-morrow, and now we will probably have to wait at least another week."

"A week!" I exclaimed. "We'll do well if we get away in six weeks."

"Then we might as well give up," said Alec. For the moment we had entirely forgotten Bluequill. Now he spoke:

"You go."

This brought us all to our senses. Alec was the first to reply.

"Not on your life, Bluequill. We stay till you're ready if it takes six months."

We all felt sorry for our show of impatience. Of course not one of us would have dreamed of deserting

Bluequill. Bill and I added our reassurances to those of Alec.

My estimate was about right. Although we kept no accurate count of time it was several weeks before Bluequill commenced to hobble about with a rude crutch. This he soon discarded for a stout cane. Then a snug-fitting collar of thick caribou hide was bound around his leg. After that it did not take long now for him to get the full use of his limb.

Again we made preparations for our journey.

CHAPTER XVII

No Thoroughfare

Before this we had, with the help of Nilgar, replaced the *Northern Hamper's* silk covering with caribou hide—equally waterproof and far tougher. There now remained only two things to do—to take a final survey of our equipment and to say good-bye.

The morning after our decision we spoke to Nilgar and explained matters as well as we could. He was, as always, friendly, and seemed sorry that we were going to leave.

“What can we give these fellows?” said Bill. “They’ve really been awfully decent to us. I feel forgiving even towards old Scarface.”

We raked over our things, but there was nothing much which we could spare. Of course there were the scientific instruments. They were of no earthly use to us, and we had not discarded them merely because they were no trouble in the basket. As the Eskimos had shown a childlike wondering interest in them, they were laid aside as one present. I tried to imagine what Cochrane would have felt if he had seen his precious instruments in the hands of these ignorant children. To Nilgar we gave one of our knives. The

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only other gift we could find was the gramophone with its one unbroken jazz record. We had shown one or two of the Eskimos how to run the machine, and it was regarded with a mixture of delight and awe. They would gather in front of it and peer into the doorway as the sounds came out. The needles had all been lost, but fishbones were a good substitute. The jazz sounded just as well as ever. Bill, indeed, went so far as to maintain that the fishbones softened the tone. We felt that our offerings were rather skimpy, but they were all we had.

When we were ready to embark the whole camp came down to see us off. As we pushed out into the current they all gave a great shout. Nilgar, who was in advance of the others, waved.

"I wish I knew how to say 'good hunting' in Eskimo," said Alec. "Nilgar is a good scout."

Just as we were fairly under way the gramophone started, and we went round the bend with the sounds of a fox-trot in our ears.

The day was dull. Heavy clouds obscured the sun. The sharpness of autumn was in the air. But in this there was no discomfort. For one thing, it meant no more mosquitoes, and with our heavy clothes we were not afraid of cold. A good breeze helped us on, and the current was brisk. By noon we must have gone fifteen miles.

Our plan was to stop as seldom as possible, and to eat most of our meals in the basket as we drifted along. We were having a bite in this way when we entered a small lake. The shores were piled with driftwood.

"This is the place that Nilgar spoke of," said Bill.

He had called the lake Ti-bi-elik. At least that was what it sounded like, and the name meant driftwood. It was cheering to find that the information given us was reliable.

The wind still blew from the west and helped us down the lake. But, when we were nearing the outlet, it swung round to north-west and grew much stronger. We drifted nearer and nearer to the south shore. There was only one thing to be done—camp for the night.

"Well, we could not have gone much farther anyway," I said. "And there's plenty of good firewood here."

Bluequill said nothing, but looked from time to time to the north-west. However, we were used to his grave silences, and thought nothing of it.

"Hungry—to snow," he said at last.

Our cooking was soon finished. Bluequill had taught us the virtues of a small fire over which you could hold a pan without being blinded by the smoke. As we sat down to eat we threw on an armful of wood, for it was now distinctly chilly. Bluequill kept looking at the clouds. Presently a few white flakes came driving down from the north. Bluequill gave a grunt.

Soon it was snowing heavily, and we blessed Nilgar as we slid into our fur sleeping-bags.

"Set the alarm for five o'clock," murmured Bill sleepily. Then there was silence.

I lay awake for a little while. The wind had died down. The low lapping of the waves was the only

sound. To-morrow we should be on the move again. With any luck we should soon reach the Bay. Wind and water owed us a good turn. What stories there would be to tell when we got home! Gradually my thoughts became blurred. I snuggled luxuriously down into the pleasant warmth of my bag and fell asleep.

All kinds of fantastic pictures and incidents filled my dreams. Nilgar and I were out in the *Northern Hamper* spearing caribou, when suddenly the basket upset and we were floundering in icy water. Instantly the whole scene changed. We were building a deer-skin lodge, but could not keep the wind from coming through and chilling our fingers. Then I heard the gramophone playing over and over again the solitary jazz record. All at once the gramophone needles seemed to be pricking my nose.

I woke with a start. The dream had been so vivid that I put my hand up to my face. My nose was icy cold. I sat up, and, as the covers fell off, I shivered. I could see my breath.

Slipping on my moccasins and undoing the tent flap I stepped out. Before me stretched the white snow, level, unbroken, silent, and then, beyond that, ice. The water had gone. Stupidly I gazed at the ice and then at the *Northern Hamper*, which under its covering of snow looked less like a boat than ever. We were frozen in. There was a quiet step behind me. I looked round and saw Bluequill.

"Winter now," he said.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Longest Way Round is the Shortest Way Home

There was nothing to say. Of course I had no right to be surprised. On our journey downstream and before we left the Eskimos, we had been afraid of the winter catching us, but lately the mildness of the weather had deceived us. We had come to believe that we had a fair margin of time. And now we were trapped.

I roused Alec and Bill. They were startled, but did not say much. They were getting used to jolts and surprises. It was not many weeks since that wretched balloon had slipped its moorings, but Alec and Bill seemed years older. Bill took up a hatchet and the billy can. He cautiously tried the ice with one foot, then with his whole weight. It seemed as solid as a cellar floor. He chopped an opening and filled the can.

"Over an inch thick," he said, tossing a splinter of ice to us.

"Well, argued Alec, "it will probably thaw, and then we can push on."

"Winter now," said Bluequill bluntly.

And we felt he was right. We might be able to go

on for a bit, but the chances were we should get caught again. If that happened we should find ourselves midway between the Eskimos and the Bay. Of all the things which might occur that would be the worst.

"Nothing for it but to go back," I said.

Bill and Alec did not protest, but I knew that for them as for myself it was a hard blow. I thought of old Terry Bowers. He had escaped from a German prison camp during the war only to be recaptured within a few miles of the Dutch boundary. I knew now what his feelings had been. Nilgar had done all for us that anybody could have expected, but to retrace our steps to his camp was like returning to prison. Turning our backs on the Bay meant giving up all thought of immediate escape from the north country. We should have to throw in our lot with the Eskimos, and they, we knew, would be going to the Arctic.

"It looks," said Alec, in a tone that was meant to be cheerful but didn't quite succeed, "as if we'd eat our Christmas dinner with the Eskimos—in Santa Claus Land."

"And hang our stockings on the North Pole," added Bill.

"It's good-bye at last to the *Northern Hamper*," I said. "From now on we'll have to be our own pack-horses. If only we had a sleigh."

"A sleigh!" said Alec. "By Jove! that's an idea."

He took the axe and went off along the shore. After a few minutes he came back lugging two fairly straight pieces of driftwood. He smoothed them with the axe.

"Runners," he explained.

In a few minutes the basket was unloaded and chopped out of the ice. We dragged her ashore and lashed the driftwood underneath. A tow rope was tied to the front corners and there was our sled. We stood back and looked at it.

"And now," said Bill, "I suppose we can't call it 'her' any longer, but anyway it's a great old hamper. Balloon, boat, sleigh—what next?"

We decided to wait for a day in order to give the ice a chance to thicken. It grew colder and colder. The following morning the ice was an inch and a half thick. We loaded up.

Bill and I pulled, while Alec and Bluequill shoved. The going was very slippery, and it was hard to get a firm footing. Occasionally we were scared by the ice cracking under our feet. After an hour we were tired, warm, and hungry.

Though we joked as we went we were really low spirited. This was the second time we had been turned back, and the miles seemed long when freedom was not waiting at the other end. About noon we stopped for a meal, leaving the sled on the ice and trudging ashore with billy can and food. Alec and Bill, I noticed, were irritated by the least trifle, though they tried not to show it. They had been so confident of a swift easy trip to the Bay that their disappointment was very bitter. When Bill stumbled and fell on his knee he muttered savagely to himself. Bluequill was the least concerned of the four.

After a light meal and a short rest we went back to our pulling and shoving. The unbroken stretch of ice

looked endless. We seemed to crawl. The dark spruce trees at the end of the lake appeared to draw no nearer. It was very different from our easy drifting downstream.

At last we reached the river and no longer saw the monotonous plain ahead. Thoughts of supper with Nilgar cheered us, and we pushed on briskly. Soon the last bend was reached. Instinctively we broke into a trot. Round the curve we swept, our eyes fixed on the left bank.

Nobody was in sight. No smoke curled up from fires. One kayak lay on the bank. Not a sound broke the stillness. The whole place had a deserted air. For a moment we stopped and stared. Nobody said anything.

We moved forward again and reached the beginning of the path leading up the bank. There was no difficulty in finding it. The snow was trampled down with footprints, and the track led northwards across the river. We raced up and passed through the belt of spruce trees. The camp site lay before us. The lodges were down and the Eskimos were gone.

Of course we shouted and wandered about. But we knew from the beginning it was no use. One look at the place was enough. What had happened was only too clear. The frost which had barred our water-route to the Bay had opened to the Eskimos the winter road to the Arctic. Nilgar had told us that they would soon be going north, but the frustration of our plans had driven all else from our minds. We had missed our friends by a few hours.

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Our first impulse was to follow their tracks at once, but a few minutes' thought ruled out that plan. The Eskimos were over a day's march to the north. After pulling and shoving all day we were tired out and in need of food.

"Eat and talk afterwards," I said.

Kindling a fire was difficult. At breakfast and at noon we had been content with a cold meal in order to save time. At last we succeeded with the fire-bow, but only after an hour's hard work. Once we had a good blaze going we felt more cheerful. We crept into the tent as soon as we had eaten. We had, of course, laid in a pile of wood for the night.

The discussion about our plans did not last long. There was really only one thing to be done; to follow and, if possible, overtake the Eskimos. In them lay our only safety. It was true that to go farther north seemed a strange way to head for home, but it was less risky than to stay where we were. If we did not catch the Eskimos the game, of course, was up; but what chance had we, with our slim equipment and our inexperience, if we went south? Bluequill would be a help, but even with him how could we plough through hundreds of miles of deep snow and trackless forest? Indeed, it was very unlikely that we should ever reach the forest.

"If we pass the winter with Nilgar," said Alec, "we'll get out somehow in the spring."

But, as we looked out of the tent door spring seemed very far away. Snow lay everywhere, and overhead the Northern Lights flashed and faded and flashed again.

CHAPTER XIX

Tracks in the Snow

Our only chance, we well knew, lay in speed. Not only had the Eskimos over a day's start, but their tracks might any moment be obliterated by a fresh fall of snow. Speed meant light travelling, and it meant also the abandonment of the basket, which had proved far more successful as a boat than as a sled. The question of what else to discard was not so easily settled. We asked Bluequill's advice. He pointed at once to the sleeping-bags, to our small stock of food, to the shot-gun, and to the ammunition.

"Take," he said. "Leave other things."

It seemed rather a drastic measure to give up the tent, but we had learned the curse of heavy packs in our hike southwards. The sleeping-bags were soon rolled up. We cut tump straps out of the deerskin which covered the basket, tied our packs, and were ready to start.

Just before going down the path to the ice we turned for a last look at the old basket. Perhaps it would be useful to the Eskimos the following summer; perhaps some explorer would find it and marvel at its presence there. At any rate our dealings with it were at an end.

As soon as we came out from the shelter of the trees we knew what was ahead of us. A bitter driving wind from the north cut our faces like a lash. Fortunately, thanks to our packs being strapped on, we had our hands free to give us some protection. But it was not long before our hands themselves were aching with cold. It was clear that we should have to use every ounce of strength and endurance to catch the Eskimos.

It was a dull cloudy day, with no dazzle from the snow and ice. The tracks led us across the river and then for a short distance east. Then they turned directly north into the teeth of the wind, following the course of a river which flowed into the one we had drifted down two days before. Where the wind had swept the ice clear we lost the footprints, but presently another patch of snow would enable us to pick up the tracks again. It comforted us to find that the Eskimos had followed a river. Perhaps by sticking to it we might come up with them, even if wind and snow destroyed the tracks.

And so for hours, long cold hours, we pushed forward, slipping and stumbling in our clumsy Eskimo-made boots, but still led on by the footprints. Beneath the shelter of a high bank we ate some food—a dreary meal of dry frozen caribou washed down by icy water.

The afternoon was like the morning, but worse. The strain was beginning to tell, and the wind was as strong as ever. With heads bowed down we leaned forward against its steady pressure. A patch of white showed on Alec's cheek and had to be vigorously rubbed. Bill's nose and mine were both nipped. Blue-

quill escaped untouched. What we were chiefly afraid of was, of course, frozen feet.

We took turns at leading. At the end of every two thousand paces we rested a few minutes, if possible under the shelter of trees. But, as we went on, trees became fewer and fewer. The bleak dreary waste of the barren lands lay all around us.

As the afternoon drew to a close we began to lose hope of overtaking the Eskimos that day. At each bend of the river our pace quickened, and we looked eagerly ahead, but only to find the same blank white road leading on and on. What would we not have given to see it dotted with human figures! One thing comforted us, however. We found the place where the Eskimos had camped at the end of their first day's march. We felt, as we left it behind, that we were cutting down the lead.

Just before dark we came to a forking of the river into two branches of equal width. One came from the north-east, the other from the north-west. In the gathering dusk we got down on our hands and knees to look for tracks, but there was little snow here.

At last Bluequill called out, and, when we came up, he pointed to scratches on the ice.

"Sleds," he said.

The marks seemed to lead up the north-west branch.

"We'll catch those fellows to-morrow," I said, with more confidence than I felt. "Now let's find a place to camp."

A hundred yards farther on was a rocky wall which gave some protection. The wind at long last was

falling. But a camp is a poor thing without a fire, and we had no fuel. We had brought the fire-bow, but it was useless. Our meat was hard as stone, but we forced ourselves to chew and swallow it.

The sleeping-bags were spread side by side. Dog-tired but determined to overtake the Eskimos on the following day if long and swift marching would do it, we were just about to drop asleep when I felt something on my cheek once and then again.

"Snow!" I said to Alec and Bill.

Down it came, first in wavering scattered flakes, but soon dense and steady.

"No tracks in the morning," said Alec quietly.

"We'll have to trust to old Bluequill. He'll find sled marks on the ice, won't you, old bean?"

Bluequill grunted.

Not far from despair we turned over and tried to go to sleep, but with small success. When at last the light came slowly from the far-away south, we were glad to get up and to be doing something again.

We shook the snow from our bags and rolled up our packs. There was no temptation to linger over breakfast. We gnawed our frozen meat as we worked.

Bluequill naturally took the lead. Under his orders we began brushing the snow away in order to discover some sled marks—the faint but unmistakable scratches on which our lives now depended. Near our camping-place we could find no marks whatever. Gradually we worked back to where the river forked. It was slow going.

All at once, when we were about a hundred yards

from the juncture of the two streams, Bluequill gave a shout. We ran up. He was staring at a bit of ice which showed an unusual number of sled marks. Then he pointed up the north-east branch.

"Oh, I've got it," said Alec. "They started up this branch, and then, for some reason or other, turned and went up the other."

Bluequill nodded.

Eagerly we followed the marks back to where the river divided.

"Now for the other branch," said Bill. But, as he spoke, his jaw dropped, and he gazed in front of him in silent amazement. There in the new-fallen snow, as plain as ink on paper, were a man's footprints. They led up the north-east branch.

"It stopped snowing," said Bill, "just a little while before we got up. Whoever he is he can't be far ahead."

The sight of these marks was strangely comforting. They would lead us, we felt sure, to companionship and safety. They were like a blazed trail to a man lost in the woods. We no longer felt alone. We stared at the footprints almost as if we expected a man to spring up in front of us.

After we had followed them a few yards they turned sharply to the right. Then we came to something which surprised and puzzled us—four footprints close together and also the mark of a sled.

There was a story written there in the snow if we could but read it. Gradually we worked it out. The marks had not been made by one man. The relative position of the footprints clearly showed that. It was

equally plain that the man with the sled had been going south. The north-bound man had seen him and had crossed the river to talk with him. That the two had stood for some time together was indicated by the unusual depth of the marks.

That was all we could discover. As to which of the two we should follow we did not hesitate. Our friends had gone north, and in them lay our hopes. We decided to look no farther for sled marks, but to follow the footsteps. The man, whoever he was, would probably take the same route as Nilgar's party.

This day there was no wind, and we went on briskly. After a couple of hours the stream had grown very narrow.

"We must be getting near the source," said Bill.

But how distant the source was we never learned, for to our surprise the tracks turned sharply to the left and climbed the bank. This gave us pause. Should we follow or should we stick to the river? Why had the man left the stream?

We cast about for an explanation. We scrambled up the bank to see if there were any landmarks which might throw light on the matter. To the north our view was cut off by a rise in the ground. Otherwise the landscape was monotonous and featureless.

"One thing's clear," said Alec. "He could not have stuck to this river much longer anyway. The thing's petering out."

"Do you mean he struck off to find a second river?" I asked.

Alec nodded.

"If we're near the height of land," he added, pointing to the rising ground, "there should be rivers hereabouts flowing north."

Bluequill broke silence.

"That right," he said approvingly.

The simplest way to test Alec's theory was to follow the footprints. They took us north and west, but no stream appeared. At last Bluequill said "Look!" and pointed ahead. All I could see was some scrubby willow bushes, but they were enough to tell him that a stream was there.

In a few minutes we were following a small winding river with high banks. We felt that we were now on the man's trail, and that at any moment we might catch up with the solitary traveller. For about an hour there was no sound but the crunching of the snow.

We had just entered on a straight stretch of about two hundred yards when Bluequill, who was in the lead, stopped dead and pointed forward. We had a momentary glimpse of a burly figure vanishing round the turn. He had a rifle on his shoulder.

We broke into a trot, raced round the bend, and almost ran into him. He had paused to adjust his pack, and had laid down his rifle beside him. His back was towards us. As he heard us coming he snatched up the rifle and whirled round.

No mistake was possible. On the right cheek was an angular scar. But for the moment he was puzzled by our dress, and that brief delay saved us. As it was, the rifle was half-raised to his shoulder when we

rushed in on him. He was able to strike a blow with the barrel which knocked Alec off his legs.

Bill, Bluequill, and I were no more than a match for him. Bluequill, though wiry, was not powerful, and Bill and I were both light. We swayed about on the ice. He was unable to break away, and we were unable to down him. The rifle he had dropped, so as to leave his arms free.

While things were in this posture we suddenly heard the sharp bark of huskies and a man's shouts. For an instant we loosed our hold and turned our heads. From the south came a dog-team racing at top speed. Scarface did not wait. Before we could stop him he grabbed up the rifle, plunged over the bank, and was gone. A moment later the dogs had reached us. Their driver was Nilgar.

Our first care was to see to Alec. But he was as eager as we were to hear Nilgar's story.

"I'm all right," he said. "No bones broken; only bruised. I want to know how Nilgar got here."

The Eskimos had left their camp much about the time we had left Driftwood Lake. At the end of their first day's march Nilgar, who had been anxious about our safety, decided to go back for us. He had guessed that we would do exactly as we had done, that is, return to the Eskimo camp. The new fall of snow had, of course, hidden our northbound tracks, and he had passed us while we were up the north-west branch of the river. The marks of the sled which we had seen were his. At the forking of the river he had stopped for a moment to talk to Scarface. On

finding our abandoned basket Nilgar knew we had returned to the camp, but could tell nothing more. The only thing left for him to do was to come north again.

We then asked Nilgar about Scarface and told him of our two previous encounters. Scarface, it appeared, had a long black record. His fellow Eskimos had come to distrust him, and he had become a sort of outlaw. About a month before we had met him he had killed a priest and was now a fugitive from justice.

The story made one thing clear to us. Scarface wished rifle and ammunition to defend himself if he should be cornered.

"We'll get that rifle back somehow," said Alec, tenderly feeling his bruised leg.

"Or he'll get the ammunition," said Bill.

With the presence of Nilgar our anxieties fell from us as Christian's bundle did. Alec was put on the sled, and we pushed on. The Eskimos were camped about five miles farther downstream. They greeted us in their simple friendly way. Once more we had a covering over our heads. The endless snow plains had lost their terror.

"Good old Nilgar," I said, as I fell asleep.

CHAPTER XX

In which we all Sleep at Home

It snowed all night. In the morning we floundered through great drifts, and, as we did so, blessed the luck which had postponed this snowstorm till we were safe among our friends. If it had caught us while we were plodding up the river we should soon have been exhausted and helpless. Even as it was we found the deerskin lodges of the Eskimos none too comfortable, for they did not prevent the snow from drifting in. To make matters worse, a blizzard began which kept us huddled together for warmth. Outside work was impossible. All that day and all the next night the blinding storm howled and moaned and whistled around us.

The following morning was bright, windless, and fiendishly cold.

"I'll never say Edmonton's cold after this," said Alec, muffled up to the nose and down to the eyes.

The wind had packed the snow hard, and it easily bore our weight. This suggested an idea to Bill.

"A snow-house would keep out the wind better than this airy lodge," he said.

At that moment along came Nilgar. He was full

of signs and words, most of which meant nothing to us. But one word sounded familiar—igloo. We smiled and nodded, and repeated the word.

"A mighty good idea," said Bill. "He must have overheard what I said about snow-houses."

We followed Nilgar and his wife, a very robust kindly lady, and another Eskimo to a spot a few yards away. Then operations began, and we looked on with eager interest. We were at last to see how the Eskimos built their winter homes.

Nilgar and his assistant architect eyed the spot and made a rough estimate of the size the house was to be. Then they set to work to cut snow bricks. Their implement was a flat piece of copper, double-edged and fastened to a wooden handle. It was called a snow-dag. The bricks were cut out of the snow within the circle which the house was to occupy. They were about two feet long, between one and two feet high, and about ten inches thick.

After the first circular row was laid another layer was placed on top. Now the structure began to slope inwards and gradually assumed a dome-like shape. The two men, who were working inside, were hidden up to their chests. At last only a small hole at the top remained open. Nilgar and his assistant were lost to sight. A moment later we saw the roof hole blocked by a snow-brick shoved up from below. The men were immured.

Suddenly the dag was thrust through the wall near the ground. A square was cut out. The workmen crawled forth and then put the brick back in its place.

In the meantime Mrs. Nilgar had not been idle. She had been raising a low rampart a couple of feet from the walls of the igloo and shovelling snow on to the igloo itself in order to fill up the chinks.

The men next built a passage way some eight or ten feet in length leading to the igloo. It was a sort of tunnel. We noticed that it was on the side away from the prevailing wind. Then Nilgar crawled along this tunnel and cut out a doorway in the igloo.

"And there you are," said Alec, "a brand new bungalow in a most select residential district with all kinds of building restrictions and no modern conveniences."

"And all done in two hours," I added.

As we peered through the tunnel Nilgar called to us to come in. The four of us crawled along in single file and wriggled through the door, which was about two feet square.

Nilgar was busy building two snow benches, one on either side of the door. When they were finished his wife laid on them rough mats made of willow twigs, and on top of all deerskin robes. The place was now ready to live in.

Nilgar in his quiet way made us understand that it was ours, and, of course, we did our best to thank him. They were rather close quarters for the four of us, but, in weather such as we had suffered from, cosiness was better than elbow-room. The igloo was about ten feet in diameter. Between the benches the passage-way was only about two feet wide.

Our entrances and exits had to be governed by rules such as are made for traffic on some of the roads in the Rockies. Two people could not pass in the tunnel. The person wishing to enter the igloo was to have right of way.

We had been so interested in Nilgar's building that we had not noticed what was going on in other parts of the camp. When we came out of our new dwelling we found that igloos were being raised all around us. The deerskin lodges were gone. The ground was dotted with white domes.

Now, too, the Eskimos began to make clothing out of their new deerskins. One day in Nilgar's igloo he pointed to his wife, who was busy with her needle, and made signs to indicate that soon after the new clothing was finished we should move north. We learned afterwards that an Eskimo superstition forbids the women to sew new caribou skins until they are in the winter houses. Hence their refusal to give us new skins at the previous camp.

At last the dressmaking was completed. Each of us wore two suits, the inner one with the fur inwards and the outer one with the fur outwards.

"The weather can do what it likes now," said Bill, who looked about as slender as a barrel. "I wonder if we'll ever wear shorts again."

The next day our clothing was put to the test. Alec had managed to shoot a caribou with the shotgun. Bill and I went out with a sled to bring it home. The place was three or four miles away, and our snowshoes slipped along easily over the crusted snow.

We found the caribou in the spot Alec had described, and loaded it on the sled.

We had not gone far on the return trip before our troubles began. The crust would not hold up the heavy sled, and we ploughed along with toilsome jerks. The wind, which we had scarcely noticed on the outward trip, was now dead in our faces.

"Anyway," said Bill, as we rested for a moment, "we've only about three miles to go, and there's still plenty of daylight."

We moved on, but presently it became only too clear that the wind was increasing. The coarse loose snow on the surface was whipped up and driven against our eyes and cheeks. We staggered on for a bit, resting frequently and turning our backs to the stinging icy particles. All at once we realized that not only was the surface snow being driven about, but now fresh snow was falling.

In a few moments sky and earth were blurred. The tracks made on our outward journey were, of course, wholly gone, and, with snow squalls whirling around us, we could make out no landmarks. All sense of time and direction was lost as we stumbled on in what we thought was the direction of the camp. We were in the heart of a blizzard.

We abandoned sled and load, and with bent heads struggled painfully forward. If we looked up we were almost blinded by the flying scud. And anyway it was no use; we could not see three feet ahead.

"We must be nearly home," shouted Bill in my ear, as we paused.

I nodded but said nothing. I was no longer sure of anything. We might have passed the igloos. How were we to recognize them in this mad confusion? It was getting dark by now. Bill fortunately had his staff and gave me one end. At any rate we should not be separated.

I do not know how long we kept moving. Probably not more than half an hour, but it seemed years. We were now nearly done out. With our backs to the storm we sat down to rest. At once the snow drifted up around us. If we stayed there long we should soon be buried. With an effort we got upon our feet again.

We could scarcely see each other now. All we knew was that the wind was still in our faces, and we hoped that meant we were headed in the right direction. We rested, got up, stumbled on, and rested again. There was no longer any pretence of denying the truth. We admitted that we were lost.

"I can't go much farther," I yelled to Bill. "Let's find some sort of shelter."

We had just gone a few steps when Bill, who was ahead, tripped and fell. Before I heard his cry of warning I took a header over him. We had found our shelter. It was a sort of mound over which Bill had dived. It was good enough. We were at the end of our tether.

There was fair shelter from the worst of the wind, but the snow drifted around us so quickly that in a few moments we were half covered. We decided that the only thing to do was to lie down and wait for daylight. With our snowshoes we scooped out a small

trench. It was difficult and slow work, for the snow poured in almost as fast as we shovelled it out. But at least the place would serve our purpose. We lay down with our heads together and placed the four snowshoes as a roof above our faces, so as to give us some breathing space.

Then we settled down for the night. Our new winter clothing kept us warm now that we were out of the wind. As we gradually became covered in with snow we grew fairly comfortable. Of course we were ravenously hungry, but that could not be helped. Finally I fell asleep with the howling of the wind and the rustling of the snow in my ears.

When I woke up there was a faint appearance of white above me. For a moment I thought we were in our igloo. Then I remembered and roused Bill. We shoved upwards at the snowshoes, but the weight of drifted snow was too much for us in our cramped position. I took Bill's staff and thrust it out beyond my head.

Suddenly I felt the other end seized and heard a shout. The staff was being pulled, but I hung on and felt myself being dragged out.

I stumbled to my feet. Alec had hold of the other end of the staff. Beside him stood Bluequill grinning. We soon had Bill out and watched his amazement. Then came questions and explanations.

"We were just going to start out to look for you," said Alec.

"Just going to start?" said Bill. "What do you mean?"

"How on earth did you find us?" I asked.

"By seeing the end of the staff," said Alec.

"Yes, but how did you happen to find the place?"

"We didn't find it. We were here already."

"Where are we anyway?" asked Bill.

"Home," answered Alec.

We looked around. Suddenly the place seemed familiar. We had spent the night under the wall of our own igloo.

CHAPTER XXI

The Top of the Map

The day after this adventure the Eskimos packed up for the last stage of their journey to the Arctic coast.

First the sleds were made ready. The men dug down through the snow and got some earth. This they mixed with water and plastered the mud on the wooden runners. Of course in a very few minutes it was frozen as hard as rock. Next they bailed up water through a hole in the ice and pulled the sleds through it until the mud was well coated with ice. Then the loading began.

The dogs were soon harnessed and we were off. As we glanced back the igloos looked very lonely and deserted. In a few moments they were no longer distinguishable against the white background. Ahead of us lay weeks of monotonous travel.

Our rate of progress, if steady, was slow. Each sled had one man driving and a second pushing. There were frequent halts to rest the dogs and to cut water-holes. The Eskimos and, for that matter, we ourselves seemed to have an almost continuous thirst. But when we were not following a river water was hard to get, and then we had to be content with eating snow.

"How many cups of tea could you drink?" asked Alec. "We'll astonish them when we get home."

The ice on the rivers was from four to seven feet thick after we had been going north for three or four weeks. To cut a hole through it was a laborious business. The job was done with an ice chisel. The metal part of this instrument was over a foot long and the wooden handle about eight feet. As they dug their wells the Eskimos scooped out the chipped ice with a rude contrivance fixed on the end of a stick. Often all this labour went for nothing, for many of the streams were frozen solid to the bottom. What interested and surprised us was the speed with which the Eskimos worked with their crude implements. One thing which aided them was the brittleness of the ice. This, of course, was due to the extreme cold.

Thus we plodded northwards. One of us was always with Nilgar. We learned how to drive and how to push. But the art of managing the dogs was never wholly mastered by us. The control of the whip was the most difficult part of the business. Nilgar's easy skill was fascinating to watch. He could make the long lash flick any part of a lagging dog or crack in the air with a noise like a pistol shot. When I grasped the short wooden handle the lash suddenly seemed inert. It would squirm and twist like a dying snake, but nothing I did would make it flash out.

We began to feel that we had never worn anything else but Eskimo clothes. We almost forgot what a bath was like, and we daily increased our facility in speaking the language. None of our friends would

have recognized us. We were almost black with dirt and sun. I had a straggly fringe of beard. We all looked years older, and we were all as hard as nails—as hard, indeed, as the caribou meat we lived on.

The days did not differ much. We trudged on by the light of the slanting sun. There seemed no warmth in its rays. Probably on no day did we travel more than twelve miles. Often it was less. But this leisurely progress did not at all trouble the Eskimos. To them time was of little account. What incentive was there to hurry? No comforts and luxuries awaited them in the Arctic. Nor, indeed, did the crawling pace irritate ourselves. The winter had to be spent in the north. Till spring returned escape was out of the question.

Gradually the days grew shorter, but we usually kept travelling till night had fallen, if the weather were fine. It was never absolutely dark.

The weeks passed. March and halt, march and halt. Dried fish and dried caribou—both brought from the summer camp—were our unchanging diet. The Eskimos, it is true, varied it when they got the chance of killing a deer and devouring the meat raw. But at this custom we drew the line. At least Alec, Bill, and I did, but Bluequill was less fastidious. Our worst hardship was the dreadful monotony of this dried and frozen food. At times we could not help tormenting ourselves with thinking and talking of a juicy leg of lamb or a sirloin steak. Only the severe physical work made the food barely tolerable.

One day Nilgar told us that this stage of the journey was nearly ended. We had almost reached the coast.

It was exciting to think that we were soon to see the Arctic.

That night we camped beside a small lake. In the morning several of the women were out digging with ice chisels, but they were not digging for water. They were cutting out chunks about two feet square and six or eight inches thick. These slabs were placed on the sleds.

"What on earth do they want to carry ice for?" said Bill. "That's one thing we're not going to be short of."

"To keep the butter fresh," said Alec.

Our curiosity was roused, but not satisfied. It was not till later that we found out the reason. When we asked Nilgar about the matter he merely grinned.

That afternoon we reached the seashore. We thought of the old voyagers who had risked and lost their lives in trying to discover the north-west passage to China, but we thought also of the hundreds of miles which lay between us and home.

Our camp that night was the last we were to make on land for months. From now on we were to live on the sea ice. We had reached the Arctic, but our travelling was not yet over. We turned west and journeyed on over the frozen sea.

After several days' march along the coast a halt was called. We had reached the spot where the Eskimos had cached their household effects of the winter before, stone lamps such as I had found in the cave, seal skins full of blubber, musk-ox robes, and caribou skins. These, together with kayaks, had been

placed on large boulders secure from wandering foxes and wolves.

All these things were put on the already overburdened sleds—the kayaks topping the loads—and we turned north again into the Arctic wilderness. In places near the shore large hummocks of ice made the travelling especially difficult. At times too the runners required mending, and perforce the caravan would halt.

At last a suitable site for the winter home was found. The long tramp was over.

“I’ve had enough sledding for the rest of my life,” said Alec. “I never want to look a toboggan in the face again.”

Now once more we watched the building of igloos. This time, however, we did not merely watch, but took a hand in cutting and placing the bricks. These igloos, which were to be used all winter, were larger and more substantial than those we had known before. They were also more sociable. Sometimes two or even three were connected by passages. Several had dance halls attached.

Our house was joined to Nilgar’s. The door and passage-way faced south so as to be protected from the north winds. When we had, as we thought, completed the igloo, with much kindly help from Nilgar, we regarded our work with modest pride.

“Not a bad shack,” said Bill.

To our surprise Nilgar cut a hole in the roof over the doorway, and said something to his wife which we did not understand. She went away and returned with one of the chunks of ice which we had seen

the women cut many days before. Nilgar fitted it into the opening.

"Well, I'll be hanged," said Alec, "a window!"

Through this very substantial pane would come whatever sunlight there might be as the sun swung low in the heavens far to the south.

Our furniture was also somewhat different. The benches were now covered with musk-ox skins, and two lamps were given to us. Several ptarmigan skins were also supplied.

"What are these for?" I asked Nilgar.

He rubbed his hands on the soft plumage.

"What does he mean?" asked Alec.

"I have it," said Bill. "They're table napkins."

The Eskimos stuck their tent poles and spears in the ramparts about the igloos. As we did not wish to be wholly out of the fashion we planted our two scout staves, each bearing a rude flag.

In a very short time the encampment was ready to face the long winter. The days were now very short and intensely cold. We grew used to the dancing quivering Northern Lights, but, familiar though they became, they never failed to stir delight and awe. But, cold though it was, the igloos were now fairly comfortable. In their land camps the Eskimos had not used lamps, but now they were lit night and day.

"They smell worse than a hot-air furnace," said Alec, "but they're just as good. No fear of our pipes freezing."

CHAPTER XXII

What I saw through the Window

Those winter days were much alike. There were occasional amusements and excitements. But on the whole we felt that till spring we were marking time. Two questions were often in our minds and on our tongues. When and how were we to travel south? And would Scarface turn up again? If he did appear in the camp we had no doubt that another attempt would be made by him to get the ammunition. We had pulled it long weary miles on our sled in the hope that we would recover the rifle or get another, and we were not prepared to let it go easily. But it was reasonable to suppose that the fellow was at least as eager to have the ammunition as we were to regain the rifle. He might be deterred by the knowledge that Nilgar was our friend. He knew that no welcome awaited him in the camp. In the meantime we made it a rule that one of us should always be in the igloo. The ammunition we placed under one of the musk-ox skins, away from the door.

One day, just when the brief daylight was beginning to fail, the four of us were sitting in the igloo. It was bitterly cold outside, and the evil-smelling seal-oil

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lamps were burning in the centre of our little circle. Through the ice window I could see the colours of the sunset.

The next moment my view was blocked by a solid dark object. It was a man's head. He was peering in at us. He had his back to the sun, and that was all I could discern. Bill, Alec, and Bluequill, absorbed in their talk, had not noticed anything. I made no motion. After all, there was nothing very sinister in a man looking through the window. Yet, in order to do so, he must be standing, I knew, on the roof of our passageway. If he wished to see us why did he not come in? Anyway I felt sure, though perhaps I could have given no good reason for my conviction, that the man meant no good to us.

The best thing I could do for the moment was to act as if I had not seen him. Nothing was to be gained by putting him on his guard.

A moment or two later he moved. His head drew back and slightly turned. The rays of the sun caught one cheek. The six-inch window blurred and distorted, but not enough to leave any room for doubt. On the cheek was a scar, and it was a scar which we had seen twice before.

"Come on!" I shouted to the others, and made for the passageway. We raced out on hands and knees. But, when we got to our feet, nobody was in sight.

"What's the matter?" asked Bill.

"Scarface again," I said, and told him what I had seen.

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The footprints on the tunnel roof were plain, but in the countless tracks leading to and from the igloo it was hopeless to try and pick out those of Scarface. He might have been hidden within a few yards of us behind an igloo. Probably he was armed with the rifle.

"The best thing we can do is to talk with Nilgar," said Alec. "And the sooner the better."

Off we went to Nilgar's igloo and we were soon deep in discussion. As soon as he understood that Scarface was in the camp he looked grave and displeased. He warned us to be careful and promised us his protection.

That night, when we were almost asleep, we heard a crunching of the snow outside. It came steadily closer until it seemed that only the thickness of the wall was between it and my head. We all listened intently. We were out of our sleeping-bags and ready, if necessary, for a tussle.

Then the sounds went up the side on to the roof. We had brought the staves in from the front after seeing the face at the window. They might, we thought, be needed unexpectedly. Alec quietly picked one up, and, as the sounds were heard directly overhead, he thrust up hard through the roof.

It was a lucky pole. A dog growled and rolled down.

"Only a husky," said Alec, with a laugh. "We're getting as nervous as a lot of old maids."

CHAPTER XXIII

In which we set up as Conjurors and Bluequill plays a Lone Hand

In the days which followed nothing happened. If Scarface were near the camp he never showed himself. Gradually he came to be less in our thoughts. Alec and Bill, indeed, as time passed, began to grow sceptical about the face at the window. We slipped back into a life of routine unbroken by alarm and suspense. The amount of time we spent in sleep was nothing short of disgusting. We would have given anything for a book. Even advertisements would have been eagerly read.

"Do you remember," said Alec to Bill one evening, "that I nearly slipped *Kim* into our packs for that week-end hike of ours? I wish I had."

"Let's see what things we know by heart," said Bill, and at once started spouting:

"Now the Four-way Lodge is opened,
Now the hunting winds are loose."

He went right on to:

"And we go—go—go from here!
On the other side the world we're overduel
Send the road is clear before you when the old
Spring-fret comes o'er you,
And the Red Gods call for you!"

"We've got the spring-fret," said Alec, "but the road's not very clear."

Alec followed with *Gunga Din*, and I did my best to sing *Mandalay*. After Kipling we tried Scott and Macaulay. How we wished we had learned more things by heart!

We did not try our recitations on the Eskimos. Their favourite amusement was dancing to the accompaniment of a deerskin drum and the chanting of the women. To us it was rather a dreary affair. Only one dancer performed at a time, and he kept it up until exhausted. Then a second took the floor. Besides dancing, the Eskimos had conjuring shows of a clumsy sort. It was these which suggested an idea to Alec.

"Let's put on a show for these fellows," he said on one of the interminable winter evenings.

"What sort of a thing?" asked Bill.

"Thought-transference, real mystery."

"Come on! What's the idea? You aren't the stuff mediums are made of."

"Oh, it won't need any special gifts," said Alec loftily. "Jim and even you will be able to take part. Do you know Morse as well as semaphore?"

Bill nodded.

"We're all right, then. No stage-properties needed except a tom-tom like the ones they use."

This took some trouble to make. It was of caribou-skin stretched over a wooden framework. When tapped with a piece of bone it gave out a solemn resonant note.

"That's that," said Alec. "Now for practising."

For the next few days he and Bill, when not sleeping or eating, were rehearsing. At last they seemed satisfied with the smoothness of their turn.

"If that amateur conjuror of theirs manages to get applause," said Alec, "what will they say to our show?"

"We should put up advertisements," said Bill. "To-night at the igloo—8 sharp—The coolest place in town!"

Nilgar, whom we consulted about our proposed show, borrowed the largest of the dance-houses for us. By the time we were ready to begin, the place was crowded. Just enough space was left for the actors. Bluequill had stayed at home on guard.

As master of ceremonies I introduced Alec and Bill with as much eloquence as I could command in Eskimo. Then Bill took the drum and started a continuous tum-tum-tumming, for all the world like the music of the whirling dervishes at a circus side-show.

I blindfolded Alec and then drew back and signed to the audience that the serious business of the evening was about to start. Waving my arms slowly and rhythmically in front of Alec's impassive face I delivered a solemn and meaningless harangue.

As I finished speaking, all eyes were on us. I put my right hand on my head; Alec did likewise. Then I held my left foot in my hand; again Alec followed suit. Every movement I made was accurately reproduced by Alec, although he could see none of my actions. Not a word was spoken. But so far the Eskimos were evidently not much excited. They thought, I fancy,

that we had learned the series of movements beforehand.

All this time the drum had kept up its monotonous beating.

I now asked Nilgar to take my place, and at once there was a movement of interest among the audience. Those at the back craned forward to watch. The first thing Nilgar did was to stand on his head. At once Alec did the same, but much more dexterously. A murmur ran through the igloo. The Eskimos, now no longer languid spectators, watched each movement with excitement. As soon as Nilgar had finished, a whole group of candidates pressed forward, eager to test Alec's mysterious powers. Once or twice, when the Eskimo's action was complicated, he hesitated for a few moments, but he made no mistakes.

When everybody seemed convinced that there was no pretence or trickery, we brought on our crowning feat. I sent Alec outside and asked Nilgar to hide my knife somewhere in the igloo. He scooped out a little recess in the wall, thrust the knife in, and sealed up the aperture with snow.

Alec was recalled. The audience watched him in silence as he crawled in and stood up. He was, of course, still blindfolded. The only sound was the unceasing throb of the drum. Alec advanced to the centre of the place, the Eskimos making way for him. Here he stopped, faced north, and extended his arm straight in front of him. Then he faced the other points of the compass, repeating the action. After this he moved to the wall and slowly began to circle

the hut. On his second round he stopped opposite the spot where Nilgar had hidden the knife. He touched the wall first at the level of his chin, then a foot lower. Here he began to scrape the snow and presently drew out the knife. The Eskimos were wildly excited.

For good measure, one more marvel was performed. Again Alec went out. From one of the spectators I borrowed a small bone ornament, and put it into another man's pocket. The two men were then as widely separated as the narrow quarters allowed.

When Alec re-entered, he started to worm his way very slowly in and out among the crowd. As he passed, they looked at him with awe. Finally he reached the right man, but for the moment he seemed dubious. Then he put his hand into the Eskimo's pocket and drew out the ornament. He then found the owner and restored it to him. The drum at last was silent.

Loud applause broke out and exclamations of wonder. Alec took off the bandage, tried to look as if life held no secrets for him, and bowed low. The performance was over.

As we passed out I caught the scowling glance of a man near the door. Whatever the audience as a whole thought, he had not been delighted with our show. He looked as if he could have knifed me with pleasure.

Until we were safely in our own igloo, we preserved a gravity befitting magicians. Bluequill was waiting for us. Bill burst out laughing.

"You've got a name to live up to, now, Alec," he said.

"We made a wonderful team," returned Alec.

"Who was that sulky beggar near the door as we came out?" I asked. "Did you notice him?"

"Yes," said Bill, "I saw him. No wonder he's gloomy. That's their conjuror. I suppose he thinks he's lost his job now. We made his show look rather tame."

Then I remembered him. We had often been to his performances.

Bluequill, who had been listening to us, now said abruptly:

"That man here when you out."

"I heard somebody walk past me," said Alec, "while I was waiting outside the dance-hall. It was the first time I was sent out."

"What did he do here, Bluequill?" I asked.

"He look round — see everything — touch everything." Bluequill illustrated his words by handling and examining everything in the igloo, lifting up the musk-ox robes, and ferreting about. After his visit the man must have slipped back to the performance just in time to see the last trick. Why he had come to our place was not clear, but that he had chosen a time when he knew we were out was in itself suspicious. Probably he had not expected to find Bluequill at home. At any rate we knew that now we had another ill-wisher in the camp besides Scarface.

As I lay in my sleeping-bag thinking of the performance, and of the disgruntled conjuror, the mono-

tonous tum-tum-tum of the drum still sounded in my ears. It seemed to have set something vibrating there that would not stop. At last my memories began to grow confused. I was almost asleep, though I thought I heard the drum still beating faintly as if it were a long way off. Several times I wakened, became drowsy again, only to reawaken. Bill occupied the same sleeping-bag. I felt him turn over. He also, it appeared, was restless.

A few minutes later the maddening sound was more distinct than ever. But I was hearing it now or feeling it? Then I knew. Bill was tapping my arm, and I spelled out the telegrapher's call of attention: dash, dot, dash, dot, dash.

In a moment I was on the alert, but did not move. Bill was using my skin instead of the caribou drum to signal to me. I spelled out the message. It consisted of one word:

“Listen.”

A faint sound as of a mouse nibbling could be heard at the top of the passage-way near our heads.

Of course I knew it was not a mouse. While we were in camp on the land we had heard and seen little creatures like field-mice, but I knew there were none here. It could not be a dog, for a dog would make more noise. If it had been a polar bear the dogs would have been in an uproar at once.

Bill and I quietly turned over and looked at the spot from where the noise seemed to come. It was just behind the lamp. In the flickering light it was difficult to see steadily, and the spluttering of the lamp made it

hard to catch sounds at times. We stared at the little patch of wall blackened by lamp-smoke. With our heads close to the lamp the odour of the burning oil was strong in our nostrils. I found myself thinking of the smell in the cave on the Ark-i-linik River, and of the surprise and shock I had then felt. We did not disturb Alec and Bluequill. The sound was now a little louder. Every few seconds it stopped, and then all was quiet except for the sputtering of the lamp.

Ever since the night when the dog climbed the roof we had kept a spear in the igloo. Bill quietly reached for it now. I thought that he was going to thrust through the wall and signed to him not to. I wished to learn all we could about the source of the noise before doing anything.

As we watched a little snow fell from the wall about a foot from the floor. It dropped just beside the lamp. The scraping sounds in the wall were now very clear. A little more snow fell, and then a tiny hole appeared in the wall. Through the hole came something small and dark.

It was a man's finger. From side to side it moved; then in a circle. Then it disappeared. Two fingers now showed and gradually the hole grew larger. Bill was ready with the spear, but again I restrained him. Again the hole was left empty, but a moment later in came a whole hand, dark and with stubby fingers. It bored a larger space and withdrew.

Once more the hand came cautiously in, farther and farther. The forearm followed. All at once the hand went right into the flame of the lamp. It was snatched

away, and outside the igloo rose a howl of pain and anger.

"What's the row?" asked Alec sleepily, rubbing his eyes.

He sat up and looked round.

"Hullo! Who's been poking holes in the house?"

We told him what had happened, and then began a long eager discussion. We huddled together in the shaking light and stared at the hole in the wall as if we expected it to offer a solution. One thing was almost certain. The burnt hand belonged either to Scarface or to the conjuror. Whichever it was, he had plainly been after the ammunition. It was lying just near the hole. So far as we knew Scarface was not aware of the ammunition's hiding-place under the musk-ox robe.

"But that sneaky conjuror fellow had probably found out," said Bill.

"And he told Scarface, you mean?" said Alec.

Bill nodded, and the talk ended. We had no evidence to guide us a step farther. All we could do now was to keep our eyes open and to be more careful than ever.

We patched up the hole in the wall and turned to our sleeping-bags. It was then we made a discovery. Bluequill was gone. None of us had seen him slip out.

"He's playing some game of his own," said Bill. "He'll turn up presently with some news for us."

But what was the game, and how long would it last? We crawled outside, but there was nothing to be seen

or heard. To go wandering about in the darkness would be futile. We could only wait. Whatever Bluequill's game was we could not bear a hand in it.

Back in the igloo again we sat and talked and wondered. By now we had given up all thought of sleep. In our impatience we found the hours long. From time to time we crept out to look for signs of Bluequill.

Dawn was just breaking when there was a rustle in the passage-way. It was Bluequill. In his hand he held a rifle.

"Where have you been?"

"When did you go?"

"What have you done?"

Bluequill grunted, gave a little grin, and held out the rifle to me.

"Your gun," he said.

Alec eagerly examined it.

"It's ours all right," he said, "and it seems none the worse. But how did you get it, Bluequill?"

We had found out long before this that Bluequill was not a swift story-teller. He could not be stampeded. We resigned ourselves to his leisurely pace. The nibbling sound which had caught Bill's attention had also roused Bluequill. While Bill and I were staring at the back of the igloo and waiting for something to happen, he had noiselessly crept out. He had gone some distance from the igloo and then circled round to the back. There he saw a man crouching by our wall. In a rough-and-tumble fight Bluequill knew that he would stand no chance. He came no nearer, but lay

and watched. To his surprise the man had all at once started to his feet with a yell and made off in the darkness. The man had been far too concerned with his burnt hand to notice Bluequill slinking along a few yards behind.

"He go an hour," Bluequill said. "Then stop—go into small igloo. Soon he sleep."

And Bluequill gave an imitation of snoring. After about half an hour Bluequill had crawled into the igloo. The sleeping figure he recognized as Scarface, and beside Scarface lay a rifle. This Bluequill grasped and then backed out.

"Good for you, Bluequill," said Alec. "I wish we could stand you a big dinner. Wait till we get home."

Bluequill smiled, lay down, and in a very few minutes was fast asleep. He had done a good night's work.

CHAPTER XXIV

A Bright Light and a Great Darkness

At long last spring was near at hand. The dragging winter was almost over. One day an Eskimo brought in news of caribou.

"If only we could get some of them!" said Alec. "I'm sick of seal meat."

"Well, we have a rifle now," Bill remarked. "Why don't you and Jim go hunting for a couple of days?"

We questioned the man, found out in a general way where the herd had been seen, and decided to try our luck.

"Deer or no deer," I said at starting, "we'll be back to-morrow."

"Good luck," Bill called out, "and bring back some decent grub."

Alec and I started off on our hunt in high spirits.

On and on we went over the ice with its thin coating of snow. As far as the eye could reach was a level plain of bare whiteness. For months on end we had lived in ice and upon ice.

"It will be good to see some black ground again," said Alec.

"And green grass," I added.

"And then there won't be fish swimming about underneath us where the cellar ought to be."

Spring was coming, but how different from the spring we knew in the south. No flowers—snowdrops or dog-tooth violets to peep up through the snow; no pussywillows; no buds of any kind, for there was no food for them in this forbidding region.

Soon our head coverings were too warm. We threw them back, and our long hair blew in the breeze.

"We need bobbing badly," said Alec. "It must be a year since we saw a barber."

We were travelling in a north-easterly direction and at a good pace. We had gone several miles when we came upon a crack in the ice about three inches wide and a foot deep, which ran as far as we could see north and south.

"Well, this is the first time I've ever seen a meridian," said Alec, staring at the line.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, don't you see? This is one of those lines you see on a map. The books call them imaginary. I wonder which one this is."

I laughed. It was a pleasant idea.

"We may as well follow it," I remarked.

Soon afterwards a crack running east and west intersected the first line.

"I suppose this is the Arctic Circle," I said to Alec.

After we had gone some distance farther north the outlines of an island became visible. It lay a little to our right. As it offered a more sheltered

camping-ground than the open ice, we headed in that direction.

It was late in the afternoon before we reached the island. It was small and rocky, but it gave us what we wanted. It bore marks of caribou, though no animals were in sight. There was a fairly good hiding-place on the island from which to shoot.

We were quite comfortable during the night. Our double deerskin clothes kept in the heat of our bodies and protected us from the cold. After an early breakfast of seal flipper we climbed to the crest of the island and looked for game. After several dull days the sun was shining.

It showed us a small herd apparently headed for the island. The wind was favourable. It was from the south and the deer were coming from the south east. They could not get our scent. Against the dazzling whiteness of the snow they were sharply outlined. We lay and watched them approach. Most of them were on the run. They circled and wheeled, ran here and there, and swiftly drew nearer. Soon we could hear the click of their hoofs. It seemed almost a shame to shoot them, especially from ambush.

But it was not a time for sentiment. We wanted meat, and the best way to get it was to shoot from our hiding-place. Neither of us was expert enough to be sure of killing a deer travelling at top speed.

Alec handed me the rifle to have first shot. The deer were now not more than forty yards away. I was lucky in my aim. A caribou halted, and then sank to the ground, as the bullet drilled it through the heart.

Alec grabbed the rifle and dropped another before the deer realized that they had run into the camp of an enemy. Then they scattered, and were soon specks in the distance.

We ran up to our kill. A crimson blotch was spreading on the snow under each deer.

"This will go well after that everlasting seal meat," said Alec.

We were naturally jubilant. We had plenty of fresh meat not only for ourselves but also for Nilgar and others who had supplied us with it during the winter, and but for whose generosity we should certainly have starved. We cut off two small pieces of meat to pack home. The rest would be brought home by the Eskimos with dogs and sleds. The rocky island would be a good landmark to guide them.

"And now for home," I said. "We'll have to go briskly if we're to get there by evening."

As we walked along, we discussed our marksmanship with pardonable pride. It was my first deer, and I was considerably uplifted. Alec was equally pleased, for his shot had been a much harder one than mine; but I felt that, as he was no novice, more should be expected from him.

The snow was glaringly white, and we were heading straight into its blinding radiance. It was like the sparkling gleam of sunlit water in the eyes of a paddler, but it was far worse. Before we had gone a mile my eyes started to burn. Now and then I saw all the colours of the rainbow dancing before me. Alec also complained of smarting eyes.

We rested with our backs to the sun. This somewhat relieved our discomfort, and presently we went on. We tried to walk backwards, but we found ourselves so clumsy that we soon gave it up.

Again and again we sat down and closed our aching eyelids. If the sun would stop shining even for five minutes; if only we could have the dull weather of our outward trip. But there was no dimming of the pitiless glare.

About noon we stopped for something to eat, and once more turned our backs to the tormenting blaze. It took an effort to start again, but the rest had done us good. For a few minutes we felt comparatively comfortable. We plodded on against the glittering rays, as they slanted from the far south. The relief, we soon found, was only temporary. In a little while we had to halt again.

When we took the trail once more, our eyes were markedly worse. At times the sunlight seemed wholly to disappear for the moment. Then would come a play of colours, mostly reds and blues, shooting hither and thither across our sight. We covered our eyes with our hands, and looked through slits between our fingers. Things were beginning to be serious. Our pace had been cut in half and we were still far from home. Alec suggested stopping until sundown, but I was afraid that Bill and Bluequill would be anxious.

Soon afterwards I saw something in the distance that looked like a man. Alec said he also saw it. We peeped with our half-shut eyes until we were satisfied

that it was a man and that he was coming towards us. We waved and shouted, but there was no response.

"It must be a mirage," suggested Alec.

I thought this rather unlikely, but I was surprised that the man had apparently not seen us.

"Perhaps he's snowblind and can't see us, Alec."

Again I peered ahead.

"Alec, I think you are right. It was a mirage. He's gone now."

"No, Jim, I can still see him."

"That's queer. Why, I see him myself now."

My eyes were aching intensely with a sharp stabbing pain. The tears were streaming down my cheeks. One moment the man could be seen; the next he was invisible.

Suddenly all was darkness. It felt as if my eyes had been seared with a red-hot iron. Then I knew what had happened.

"Alec," I cried, "I am snowblind."

Alec gave an exclamation of dismay.

"Can't you see anything?" he asked.

"Not a thing. How are your own eyes?"

"Pretty sore, but I can still see a little."

"We must save your sight if we can. How about cutting a strip off your pack and putting it over your eyes? Leave a slit to see through."

"Worth while trying, anyhow," Alec replied. "What fools we were not to think of it before!"

I heard him put down his pack.

"I've got the bandage on," he announced presently.

"But I'm afraid it's too late. I can hardly see at all."

We moved on a few paces, Alec leading me by the hand.

"It's no good, Jim," he said, "I'm blind as a bat."

We should have been near despair but for one thing. Assistance was close at hand. I had seen a man approaching. I might have thought my sight was playing me a trick, for he had appeared and disappeared as if by magic; but Alec had also seen him. He could not be far away now.

The best thing for us to do was to sit down and wait. What if he were also snowblind? We had suspected that when he failed to answer our signals. Who he was we could not guess. We knew that at that time of year Eskimos might be found almost anywhere on the ice in these regions. After being shut in through the long winter they were travelling here and there, visiting and hunting.

Long minutes passed. We sat there on the ice, straining our ears to catch a footfall and shouting from time to time. Would the fellow never come? How long snowblindness was likely to last I did not know. I knew that it was not necessarily a permanent disability. But, if help did not come, our position was a difficult one.

Soon I thought I heard footsteps. I called out, but there was no answer. Then I was convinced I heard a step; this time on the other side of us. I called again. Still no answer.

A strange uncomfortable feeling came over me. I was positive somebody was near us, and almost positive

that he was not a friend. I could have cried aloud with the suspense.

Once again I heard a footstep. This time there was no possible doubt. At the same instant Alec shouted:

“The rifle!”

We had laid it down between us. I made a grab, but my hand hit the bare ice. It was gone. In another moment I heard a tussle, and knew that Alec was grappling with a man. I tried to go to his assistance, but, before I could do anything, the struggle was over. There was an exclamation in Eskimo. I knew the voice. It was Scarface.

We could hear him emptying a pack. He was only a few yards away, but we were as powerless as if we had been bound hand and foot. Was he going to shoot us like rabbits? He was a murderer, and he had a grudge against us. We had trussed him up on the island, and now he could take his revenge safely. Who would ever know what had happened?

I heard the click of the lever, as he opened the magazine. Then there was a pause. I knew the rifle was loaded, and now he also knew.

Alec and I instinctively scrambled to our feet. Whatever was coming, we felt we had better stand up to meet it.

“Good-bye, Alec,” I said, and we grasped hands.

There was dead silence. And then the man laughed. The breech was slammed to, and there came a sound of footsteps growing fainter and fainter. For some reason he had decided not to kill us.

Of course we all but collapsed now that the strain

was over. We laughed and cried and shouted and talked wild nonsense. It was not for some time that we remembered that we were still helpless.

We thought that Bill and Bluequill might get Nilgar to send out a search party. They themselves would come anyway. But when? And what were we to do in the meantime? Could we do anything towards finding our way home?

"The wind was on our left this morning," said Alec. "If we keep it there we should be headed right."

We crawled about till we found our packs. They had been emptied of food and ammunition. Scarface had not shot us, but he had left us to starve.

Our eyes were very painful, and to get any ease we had to keep them tightly shut. Walking slowly hand in hand we began to move south, guided by the breeze on our left cheeks. It was hard, we found, to make any estimate of our pace. It was probably very slow. There was no sound but the slight crunching of the snow under our moccasins.

"Look here," said Alec, "why not count our paces? Then we can tell how far we are going."

We took turns. If it did nothing else, at least it gave us something to think about.

The wind began to drop. Our guide was failing us, but we had another and better one—the sun, shining warm on our faces from the south. The sun, however, could not guide us for very long.

"It looks like a night on the ice," I said.

"We'll be all right," Alec replied. "It's not cold; and perhaps the darkness will bring our sight back."

"At any rate we won't have to screw our eyes so tight."

The slight wind was now very fitful. Presently it ceased altogether. After walking on for a little while we decided to camp. We no longer felt sure of our direction.

We had no tent to put up, no fire to light, no food to eat. We were ravenously hungry, and to-morrow might bring no relief.

"The beggar didn't shoot us anyway," said Alec. "Let's get to sleep if we can."

And sleep we did, though with empty stomachs and sore eyes. Our sight showed no signs of returning.

With the sun for guide we started off in the morning. We had to risk going in the wrong direction. The pinch of hunger was too sharp to allow us to sit and wait to be rescued.

On we went, counting our hundreds, sometimes aloud, sometimes in silence. When it was Alec's turn, I would often be wondering if he had forgotten or had gone over his total, when I would hear "99—100". Then I would take up the count.

We were going on steadily in this way when Alec stumbled, nearly pulling me down with him.

"What was it?" I asked.

"A crack. My toe went right in."

I knelt down and felt the ice. I had just cleared the crack.

"Do you know where we are?" I asked.

"Somewhere between Canada and the North Pole, I suppose."

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"I can do a little better than that. We're on our arctic circle. Do you remember?"

"By Jove, you're right. But what if we are?"

"Why, all we have to do is to follow it east and west until we strike your special degree of longitude. Then we can go south without sun or wind."

Alec went to the left, I to the right. Of necessity we went very slowly, feeling for the crack every few steps. Our arrangement was that, if after two thousand paces we had not found the other crack, we should then turn back and try some other plan. We did not wish to get widely separated. Five hundred, a thousand, fifteen hundred, two thousand. I completed my count without finding anything, and began to retrace my steps. I had almost reached two thousand again, when I heard a shout from Alec.

"I've got it."

The rest, as it turned out, was easy. We now had the comfort of knowing that every step, however slow and short, was taking us nearer home. Hunger was our chief worry. We must have been going several hours at our snail's pace when we heard our names called. It was Bill and Bluequill.

We had much to tell one another. They talked while we ate. Our turn came afterwards.

With two pair of eyes for the four of us we made fairly good speed to camp. For three days our eyes were a torment. We were forced to wear bandages. After two weeks our blindness was only a memory.

CHAPTER XXV

Bill tells the Story

This is an account of what happened to Bluequill and me while Jim and Alec were off hunting.

The second day came and went with no sign of their return. Bluequill and I began to grow a little anxious. Fortunately the weather was mild, and we had no cause to worry on that score. But, in one way, the very mildness of the weather was a source of anxiety. If storms were not to blame for their delay, there must be some other and perhaps more alarming cause. Had there been an accident?

When the next morning came, further waiting was intolerable. I knew Bluequill was almost as concerned as I was, though he had said next to nothing.

We knew the direction they had taken, and, in a general way, the plan of their expedition. But we realized that our chances of finding two boys on those immense ice-plains were small enough. There were no tracks to follow. There had been enough wind to obliterate all footsteps in the coarse shifting snow. We could only go north and use our eyes; if we did not find them, no doubt Nilgar would help us later.

Luckily I had the field-glasses. Every few minutes I scanned the horizon for moving figures. We had been

going for perhaps two hours, and I had just raised the glasses for a survey of the great white desert, when I thought I saw a dark speck in the distance. I explained to Bluequill, and handed him the glasses.

"Man," he said, as he lowered them.

We hurried forward for a few minutes and then halted for another look.

"Man with rifle," said Bluequill this time.

Was it Alec? If so, where was Jim? Somehow I felt it was neither of them, though I could not have said why. The sight of that single figure stirred vague but strong misgivings. Yet my common sense told me that it was probably an Eskimo hunter and that he had very likely seen Jim and Alec.

Again we halted to use the glasses. Bluequill had them up to his eyes, when, to my surprise, he motioned me to lie down. There was no apparent reason, but I obeyed.

"Not Jim—Alec," he said.

The man was now coming straight for us, but before he had gone much farther, he swung off to our right. It was not clear whether he had seen us or not.

All this time Bluequill had been busy with the glasses. At last he laid them down.

"Scarface," he said with a quiet certainty. "We follow him. He got our gun, I think."

If Bluequill were right, then Scarface must know the whereabouts of Alec and Jim. It was for us to make him tell.

"He go to his igloo," said Bluequill.

Not till he was out of sight did we get up; but,

once we started, we moved quickly, Bluequill leading. After about an hour's march he halted and went down on hands and knees.

"Igloo over there," he whispered, pointing ahead.

He went on alone to reconnoitre. When he had crawled perhaps fifty yards he beckoned me to join him. There in front of us on a slightly lower level was a small igloo. Not a sign of Scarface. We crept forward and reached the back wall. There we stopped and listened intently. Faint muttered sounds were audible from inside. Our man was at home. But how were we to tackle him? To crawl through the passage-way would put us at his mercy. Yet time was precious. Jim and Alec might be badly in need of help. We could not wait indefinitely for Scarface to come out.

Then a plan occurred to me, and I whispered it to Bluequill. We would crawl round to the entrance, he on the left, I on the right. Then we would make a noise to attract Scarface's attention. As he came out we would jump on him. Bluequill nodded, and started off to the left.

I had almost reached the end of my crawl when I heard a sound in the passage-way. Then a man crept quickly out, jumped to his feet, and raised a rifle. All this happened in a flash. The man's back was towards me. Half a dozen paces in front of him stood Bluequill. As the Eskimo was about to fire, I gave a shout and sprang forward. Taken by surprise, he lowered the rifle and glanced over his shoulder. Before he could raise the rifle again, both of us had grappled with him.

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He tried to jerk himself and the rifle free and seemed on the point of breaking away from us. Then there was a deafening explosion. My hands were suddenly covered with something warm and wet. And at once Scarface and I fell heavily upon the ice. In an instant I was upon my feet again, but he did not move. He lay still and rigid. Blood was pouring from his mouth.

The whole thing had happened so swiftly that Bluequill and I were left staring in amazement. I knelt down and ripped open Scarface's clothes at the neck. He had been shot through the throat, and had apparently been instantly killed.

I had never seen violent death before. A terrible feeling of nausea overcame me.

Presently I was able to look at the matter more calmly. If I had not shouted and rushed in on Scarface, he would undoubtedly have shot Bluequill. In the struggle itself it was his own hand which had fired the rifle, though accidentally. And, anyhow, it was our rifle. How had it come into his hands again?

As I thought of Alec and Jim, I felt ready to act. We entered the igloo. There was our ammunition. We noticed also some caribou meat.

That was all, except some odds and ends. The rifle and ammunition we of course took with us.

It was not more than an hour since we had come to Scarface's igloo, yet to me it seemed that years had passed. Of Jim and Alec we had learned nothing, except that somewhere and somehow they had fallen in with Scarface and had apparently been worsted.

CHAPTER XXVI

In which the North lets Us go

It was a few mornings later. We were not yet out of bed.

Boom! Boom!

I started up. The ice trembled under my feet. Tremendous cracking sounds reverberated through the air. Dull heavy rumblings came from under the floor.

Boom! Boom!

Our whole world seemed to be breaking up. The ice shook under us. Nilgar had warned us to expect something of this sort, but it was startling enough. Spring had come, and the ice was no longer safe. We should soon have to retreat to land. The sun had been getting steadily warmer, and pools of water appeared on the ice here and there. Our igloo had melted through in places; our roof was now made of deerskins. Almost any day, we were told, the sea would be a mass of floating ice pans.

With the coming of warm weather we were impatient to be off. In the bleak winter, with next to no daylight, we had resigned ourselves to inactivity. But now freedom seemed in sight. The world no

longer seemed hostile. The sun left us for only a few hours.

The break-up really came sooner than was expected, and there was a general rush and bustle to pack up and reach the shore.

Our plans were fairly definite. With Nilgar and Bluequill we had talked them over countless times. We were to go south-west by way of the Coppermine River to Fort Confidence on Great Bear Lake, and there we hoped to find Bluequill's party of surveyors. With their help we should somehow reach Fort Norman on the Mackenzie River; then home by boat and train. It all sounded very simple. But by now we had learned that plans have a habit of getting tangled up. What heartened us more than anything else was that Nilgar had promised to come with us part of the way.

When we reached land, we parted from the Eskimos, the simple ignorant children with whom our lot had been so strangely thrown. They had saved our lives, but we were hard put to it to show our gratitude. We stammered in Eskimo, and we rubbed noses with every man, woman, and child.

"Now I know what the Prince of Wales feels like after shaking hands with a few hundred people," said Alec, gingerly rubbing his nose after this energetic leave-taking.

There was only one person in the camp whom I am sure we did not embrace. That was the conjuror. Since the night of the performance he had kept himself sulkily aloof, and now he was glad to see the last of us. If we had been able, we should have been

glad to teach him the secret of our magic, and so restore his prestige.

Under Nilgar's guidance we struck westward over rough, bleak country. After several days of swift but uneventful travel we swung somewhat to the south. And then one day we crossed a range of bare hills and came down into a valley. The banks of a river were visible a short distance ahead. As we went towards the stream, we saw Nilgar looking about him. Presently he stooped and picked up something from the ground. It gleamed as he held it up in the sunlight.

"Copper!" said Bill in surprise.

"Then the river ahead is the Coppermine," I said. "Now I know where we are."

Compared with the Arctic it seemed almost like home. I knew we could not be far from Great Bear Lake. Our difficulties seemed almost at an end. The north was at last willing to let us go.

The river was crossed on a rough raft. When he had landed us safely on the far bank, Nilgar said that he must now turn back. Once more he described as well as he could the route we should follow. We had, of course, no right to expect more of him, but we were sorry to part. His face brightened when we promised to leave the rifle and shot-gun for him at Fort Norman. We knew he planned to make a trip there later in the summer.

He shoved off the raft, and we watched him ferry his way across. He climbed the bank, turned once, waved his hand, and headed off the way we had come.

"I wonder if we'll ever see him again," said Alec, gazing at the diminishing figure.

"Here's hoping," said Bill.

A few minutes more and Nilgar was out of sight; and we turned again to our journey. Following the Coppermine south for a short distance, we found a river flowing in from the west. This we knew was our guide.

Upstream we went until we reached a small lake, which we circled. A little later we had to tramp round the shores of a second lake. Here, following Nilgar's directions, we left the water and struck west over rising ground.

The west side of the slope was clothed with fir trees. At the sight of their dark beauty we stopped in delight.

"I had almost forgotten," exclaimed Alec, "what great things trees are."

"Goodbye to the Barrens," said Bill.

There were flowers here and there and butterflies too.

A small creek, half hidden in the woods, led westward, and we knew that at last we had gained the watershed of the great Mackenzie. That night our camp was among the trees and beside the stream. We lay on spruce boughs before a blazing fire, and with the crackling of the dry wood was mingled the voice of the wind in the tree tops. It was music to our ears.

With light hearts we went on downstream in the morning. About noon we came on a cabin. It was locked up and looked as if the owner had been away for several weeks at least.

Behind the cabin we found a canoe. Bluequill's face, when he saw it, lost its solemnity and fairly beamed. Eagerly he inspected it. It was an eighteen-footer and in moderately good condition.

"Him better basket," he said, with a grin.

We decided to borrow the canoe. Who the owner was we could find out at Fort Confidence or at Fort Norman. We loaded and pushed off, Bill paddling in the bow, Bluequill in the stern, and Alec and I sitting in the middle.

Never had a canoe felt so luxurious. We glided downstream with effortless speed. The river widened, and we came out on a bay. This we took to be the eastern end of Great Bear Lake. Behind us the wind freshened. Catpaws chased across the water.

As we went on, the bay opened out, and small waves danced about the canoe. We were low in the water, but the canoe was well trimmed. Presently a point of land shut out our view of the stretch ahead. On rounding it we found ourselves facing the full broad expanse of the lake. The growing roughness of the water forced us to hug the north shore. Another point was gained and passed. Beyond it, we saw on the bank a few tents, an old log cabin, and a stone chimney—Fort Confidence at last. Bill and Bluequill began to race.

No one was in sight round the fort. The waves were higher here. It was lucky that our trip was nearly ended. We were shipping water and should have had to land soon anyway. We headed straight for the Fort. But now the wind, coming on our right side, began to

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bother us in earnest. Soon we had to give up our short cut and run before the breeze.

Our plan now was to go just beyond the Fort and fight our way back directly against wind and wave. In our eagerness to reach land we had misjudged the force of the wind.

We passed the Fort, and, when we thought we had gone far enough, Bluequill shouted to Bill. We turned without accident, and then began a long hard tussle. The waves slapping against the bow drenched us with spray. But we were creeping towards the shore.

And now we could see men moving about near the tents. I waved my hand. They waved in return, but seemed wholly unconcerned. One of them was an Indian.

It was soon clear that it was to be touch and go. I rather doubted if Bill and Bluequill could hold out. In that rough water we could not think of changing places. Alec and I had to remain helpless passengers. The only aid we could give was by bailing. The wind seemed to be freshening. We were making very little head-way. The men on shore looked with languid interest at our struggle. I shouted, but the wind carried my words away. I made signs that we were in distress, but the men gave no response except to wave their hands once or twice. Then they calmly sat down to watch us.

At first I could not understand their indifference. Then the reason came to me. They took us for Indians and, as such, able to look after ourselves.

The shore was still drawing nearer, but very slowly.

Our progress was barely perceptible. Bill was nearly exhausted. He had done well. My arms ached to help him. His stroke was gradually weakening. Soon we were barely holding our own.

Bill realized this and braced himself for a last effort. He gave a short fierce stroke. Something snapped. The canoe lurched to the right, shipped a wave, and then righted. Bill was sitting motionless, staring at the handle of the paddle. The blade had broken off.

It was no longer a question of reaching shore, but of keeping afloat. Alec and I bailed furiously. Only Bluequill's skill saved the canoe from at once whirling round broadside to the waves. But we had to turn, and how were we to escape being broadside then?

Suddenly Bluequill shouted to Bill to face round, and, as he did so, swiftly handed him the remaining paddle. We tore along before the wind, tobogganing down great waves which tilted Bill high in the air. Fort Confidence faded away behind us.

Of what lay ahead we knew nothing except that Great Bear Lake was a vast stretch of water. We had counted on help at Fort Confidence, and had missed it by a hairbreadth.

It took all Bill's time to keep the canoe running straight before the wind, and every few minutes a wave washed over the stern and set us bailing. One difficulty was that Bill's end being in reality the bow was higher than Bluequill's and so was caught by each gust. The spray was icy cold, and we were soon shivering.

Presently we were riding on a heavy swell, now lifted high on a wave's crest, now sunk deep in the trough. Fortunately we were in less danger, for the waves did not break over us as the smaller ones nearer shore had done.

When the wind at last began to fall, darkness was not far off. The waves still were high.

"The night won't be long," said Alec. "We can land somewhere in the morning. If only we can keep her from swamping now."

Once, as we rose on a wave, I thought I saw something—a faint grey streak—some distance ahead. When we sank it disappeared. Again we climbed, and again it was visible. As we drove on, the grey line broadened.

"Noise ahead," shouted Alec.

We all listened. There was undoubtedly a new sound.

Bluequill, who had not spoken since we turned about, now uttered a word.

"Ice."

Of course. Why had not we thought of that before? We knew that ice-floes were drifting about in the sea not many miles to the north. Why not here too?

Soon we could plainly see the irregular outline of the floe and hear distinctly the coarse grating sound as the ice-pans jostled each other. We could not dodge this barrier, and it was equally plain we could not stay in the canoe. The waves luckily had by now considerably abated.

As a matter of fact we had little trouble in jumping

out on the ice-floe and hauling the canoe up after us. What difficulty there was came from our being cramped. We were all cold and tired, and Bill was not far from exhaustion.

But on a heaving groaning chunk of ice proper rest was impossible. We had to be satisfied with remembering that we might easily have been lying at the bottom of the lake.

"You see that man at the Fort?" asked Bluequill.

"You mean the Indian?" I said.

"Him my fader," answered Bluequill.

The father had, of course, not been expecting to see Bluequill and apparently had not recognized him.

Dawn showed us a rough and rocky shore about a mile to the south. The storm was gone. It did not take long to launch the canoe and reach land.

We knew that Bear River ran out of the lake to the west and that it would take us to Fort Norman. The only way to find it was to hug the shore and to explore every bay. Of course we could have headed back to Fort Confidence, but the great open stretch was too dangerous. If we failed to find Bear River, we should ultimately have to make other plans.

The first thing to do was to catch some fish, and the second thing was to make a paddle. It was noon before we were off.

Days of monotonous travel followed. Down to the end of long bays we paddled only to find that we had drawn a blank and had to come out again. When the wind was high we stayed in camp.

At last one afternoon, as we rounded a point, Alec who was in the bow, gave a shout. There before us were the rushing waters of a river. At once we camped. At cock-crow next day we were paddling downstream. Before dark we were on the broad waters of the Mackenzie, and on the shore we saw the friendly white-washed buildings of Fort Norman.

"Let's find the Hudson's Bay factor," I said, as we beached the canoe. "He'll be able to tell us about the boats."

As we slowly climbed the bank, stiff and tired, after hours of paddling, several people met us. Alec stepped up to one of them and spoke to him in Eskimo. It was Terry Bowers.

What was he doing at Fort Norman? We could not guess. He stared at Alec and at us. In dress and speech we were Eskimos, but our features did not suit the rest of the picture. He was plainly puzzled. Finally, as Alec continued voluble, Terry said:

"You've got hold of the wrong person, old bird."

He began to move away.

"Well, good-bye, Terry," said Alec in English. "Glad to have seen you."

Terry spun round.

"Who the dickens are you?"

"This," said Alec very deliberately, "this is Jim, and this——"

But he was not allowed to get any farther. Terry gave a whoop, and for the next few minutes we were busy answering questions.

"Where did you fellows come from?"

"Oh," I returned, "we're homesteading north of 68. Just come down for supplies. How's everything in Edmonton?"

Terry laughed.

"We gave you up for lost long ago. Tell us your story."

Of course the three of us talked all at once, and, when we had given Terry an account of our adventures, we made him tell us all about things at home.

"By the way, how are you going to get home?" he asked, when our stream of talk had halted for a moment.

"By boat, of course. When does she sail?"

"This is August," said Terry in a pensive way.

"The next boat is in June, I think."

"What do you mean? Aren't there any boats this year?"

"There were. But the last left this morning."

"Then how are you going back yourself?"

"In a bus; I've got a big new one. I brought up some men who are interested in the oil well down the river."

He paused, and then added.

"My people are not going back at once. Would you like a lift?"

We had no preparations to make, except to inquire about the owner of the canoe. It turned out that he had left the country the year before, so that on that score our conscience was easy.

Bluequill did not come with us. He would manage somehow to rejoin his father, he said. Besides, he did not care to face the chances of a journey by air.

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"Basket—canoe all right," he said. "Me no like fly."

We were sorry to say goodbye; and, in spite of his casual manner, I think that he was too.

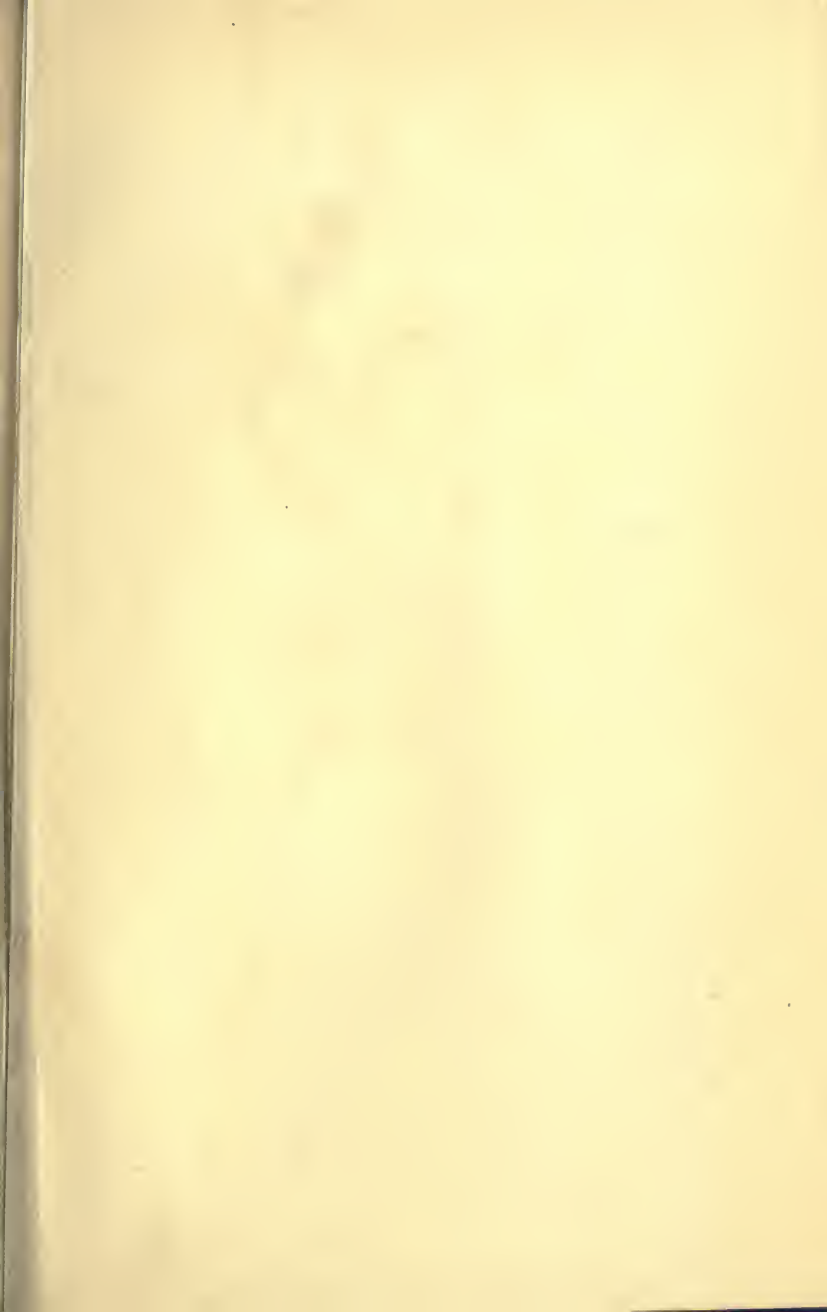
By daybreak we were off. Terry made only one stop on the way. When Edmonton came in sight, we gazed down at familiar places with queer excited feelings. Now we approached the landing-place. Now the plane circled, landed, and taxied up to the hangar.

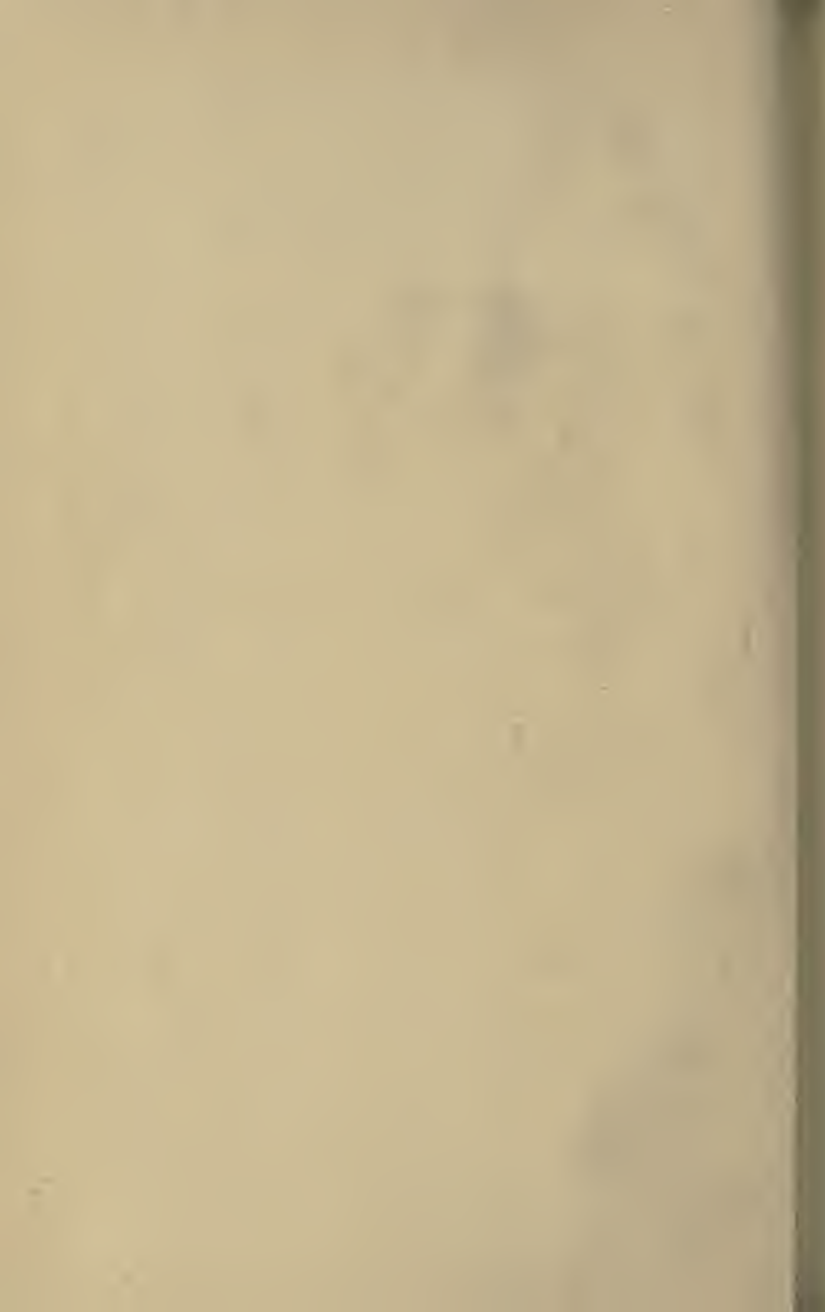
A little group of spectators stared at us, as we got out and walked to a motor.

"Are they Eskimos or just dressed up?" said one boy.

"Look at their hair," said another.

But all we knew or cared about was that our deer-skins were stifling in the August sunshine and that we were home.





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